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Contextual Bible reading: a South African case study

Introduction

All interpretations of the Bible are contextual. This statement would have aroused the ire of the vast majority of biblical scholars a decade or so ago. While it may be true for ordinary readers of the Bible, biblical scholars would have retorted, it was false with respect to biblical scholarship. Biblical scholarship, they would have gone on to claim, provided an objective and ideologically neutral reading of the Bible. Indeed, these scholars would have argued, this was the fundamental difference between non-scholarly and scholarly interpretations, namely, that the former are subjective while the latter are objective.

The last couple of decades have destroyed any lingering notion of an objective or ideologically neutral interpretation of the Bible (or any text for that matter). Some still insist, saying, ‘But we can know what the Bible meant; even if we are unsure what it now means.’ However, the Bible is unable to tell us by itself what it meant. A reader is required before the Bible says anything, whether what is meant or what it means. And once we acknowledge a real reader as an active participant in the process of interpretation, we must abandon any strict claim to neutrality and objectivity. Readers always bring their concerns and questions to their readings of the Bible, even if they are scholarly questions and concerns. Our contexts, therefore, always shape our reading practice.

The most prominent context, historically, that has been brought to the Bible is a theological context. Beliefs about God and the world have always played a significant role in how we approach the Bible and what we find there. Theological contexts have exercised such a significant influence on biblical interpretation over the centuries that modern biblical scholarship could be said to have arisen as a response to this theo-

Abbreviations used:

JTKA = Journal of Theology for Southern Africa
YCW = Young Christian Workers

logical dominance. However, in attempting to free itself from theological control, biblical scholarship made overstated claims about neutrality and objectivity, whereas what they were really doing was bringing other, non-theological, contexts to bear on the Bible. Instead of reading the Bible from a theological context, modern biblical scholarship read the Bible from a historical context. Instead of asking theological questions, biblical scholarship asked historical questions.

The great contribution of biblical scholarship has been that it has made us aware of the historical contexts that produced the Bible. The Bible, biblical scholarship has demonstrated, is a product of the social, political, economic, cultural and religious contexts of the Ancient Near East. Historical concerns and questions have sought to explore and reconstruct this complex context and in so doing have enhanced our understanding of the contexts from which the Bible emerged and to which particular biblical texts originally spoke.

But the Bible is not only about the past, it is also a book that speaks to the present. While it is worth trying to reconstruct what the Bible might have meant in its original contexts, the vast majority of Bible readers want to know what the Bible means for their current contexts. While biblical scholars might not have been interested in establishing lines of connection between the biblical contexts and contemporary contexts, ordinary readers of the Bible are considerably interested in doing so.

But historical concerns and questions are not the only ones that biblical scholars have brought to the Bible. Dissatisfied with the neglect of the Bible as text, as literature, increasing numbers of biblical scholars have turned their attention to literary questions and concerns. Instead of asking historical questions, these biblical scholars have asked literary questions. The Bible, after all, is literature. Literary concerns and questions have led to a close and careful reading of the biblical text.

Again, biblical scholars have often been reluctant to explore the potential literary approaches to the Bible have for contemporary contexts. Most biblical scholars are embarrassed to make the move from ancient text to current context. But here too ordinary readers of the Bible are far less reticent. They have eagerly embraced the available literary resources, finding fertile lines of connection between the literary context of a biblical text and their own current contexts.

Ordinary readers of the Bible do not need the resources of biblical research, whether historical or literary, in order to bear the Bible speaking into their contexts. They have always been able, using their own resources, to find lines of connection between the Bible and their lives. But, I will argue in this essay, the resources of biblical scholarship provide substantial additional ways of establishing connections between the Bible and the ordinary interpreter. Indeed, the historical and literary resources of biblical scholarship offer the ordinary Bible interpreter a host of (other) potential places of connection for the many questions and concerns that they have in their daily lives.

**Genealogical threads**

What I will now call 'Contextual Bible Study' is a particular contextual manifestation of the collaboration between socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary, non-scholarly, interpreters of the Bible in South Africa.2 The term 'Contextual Bible Study' has two main genealogical threads. The first genealogical thread is directly related to my comments in the 'Introduction' above. While biblical scholarship was generally refusing to acknowledge its contextual dimensions, particular marginal sectors within biblical scholarship openly acknowledged and advocated interpreting the Bible from and for a particular context. This was the case for Latin American Liberation Theology, African American Black Theology, Feminist Theology, African Theology, Tanzanian Ujamaa Theology, and South African Black Theology (to name those that have most impacted on the formation of 'Contextual Bible Study').

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Alongside this genealogical thread is another, specifically rooted in the African continent that can be described as the "African existential" or "African theological." These theologians, often associated with a particular strain of black theology or an African worldview, have sought to understand and express the complexities of African existence and identity, often in对话 with both the African continent and the global Christian community.

The African existential approach stands in contrast to the more "Western" or "Eurocentric" views of theology, which are often seen as abstract and disconnected from the lived experiences of many Africans. This approach emphasizes the importance of context and culture, recognizing that theological truths are not universal but are shaped by the historical and social contexts in which they are developed.

African theologians have contributed significantly to the broader field of theology by offering new perspectives on age-old questions. Their work has not only enriched the global Christian community but has also provided insights into the spiritual needs and experiences of Africa's diverse populations.

The African existential approach to theology is characterized by a deep sense of solidarity with the oppressed, a commitment to social justice, and a desire to bring about positive change in the world. It is often associated with the work of figures such as Paul Gilroy, who has explored the intersection of race, culture, and religion in his influential work "The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Blackness in the Atlantic Imagination."
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development, as noted in the initial steps towards the formation of the Continental Theology, which was initially focused on African theology and the need to challenge Western dominance. This approach has been influenced by the work of Albert Neuman, who has argued for a liberation theology that is rooted in African cultural contexts.

African liberation theology, which has been a significant influence on the development of the Continental Theology, is characterized by its emphasis on the role of the oppressed in shaping their own salvation. This approach has been influenced by the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, as well as the work of the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

The Continental Theology, as a whole, has been characterized by its commitment to the fight against colonialism and imperialism, as well as its focus on the needs of the oppressed. This approach has been influenced by the work of Walter Brueggemann and his emphasis on the role of the prophet in society.

In conclusion, the development of the Continental Theology has been characterized by its focus on the needs of the oppressed, its commitment to social justice, and its emphasis on the role of the church in addressing the challenges of our time.
The Canon Document, for example, was produced using this general method. But it was the process rather than the product that was important. The result was a document that was organized according to the principles of the ACC (African Church) and the AEC (African Episcopal Church). The process involved the selection of texts that were felt to be relevant to the needs of the ACC and the AEC. These texts were then edited and revised to ensure that they were in keeping with the ACC and AEC's beliefs and values.

The process of editing and revising involved a number of steps. First, the texts were selected based on their relevance to the ACC and AEC's beliefs and values. Then, the texts were edited to ensure that they were in keeping with the ACC and AEC's beliefs and values. Finally, the texts were revised to ensure that they were in keeping with the ACC and AEC's beliefs and values.

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historical reconstructions, though there are signs that CEBI’s reading practices are becoming more varied. An emphasis on socio-historical reconstruction, also a feature of Mosa’a’s Black hermeneutics and Elisabeth Schlussler Fiorenza’s feminist hermeneutics, places a strong emphasis on the contribution of the socially engaged scholar. In the early formation of ‘Contextual Bible Study’, this feature was present, and was typified by the work of Gunther Wittenberg, the founder of this form of collaborative praxis. However, worries about allocating the intellectual, organic or not, too much dominance and the ordinary interpreter too little agency in the interpretive process led, gradually, to a more egalitarian form of collaborative biblical interpretation. To this we now turn in the next section.

Contextual Bible Study

The final genealogical thread I will discuss takes an institutional form, and has been foundational to the emergence of ‘Contextual Bible Study’. Founded in late 1989, The Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) provided an institutional base from which to develop a collaborative Bible reading practice. Through years of sustained collaborative work with communities of the poor, working-class, and marginalised, the ISB’s reading practice has shifted its emphasis away from a socio-historical starting point to a more egalitarian one. However, the sister organisation, The House of Studies for Worker Ministry, which merged with the ISB in the mid-1990s and which used the reading practices of the YCW, has kept this emphasis alive within what is now called the


Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research (Ujamaa Centre).

More than seventeen years of Bible study praxis - a process of sustained action and reflection on our Bible reading methodology - has produced what is commonly referred to as ‘Contextual Bible Study’. An example of a ‘Contextual Bible Study’ will help at this point in my analysis. A typical ‘Contextual Bible Study’, on the theme of ‘economic justice’, for example, looks like this:

[In plenary]
1. Listen to this Mark 12:41-44 being read aloud and then read it for yourself. What is the text about?

[Plenary report-back]

[In small groups]
2. Now read Mark 12:38-40. What are the connections between Mark 12:41-44 and Mark 12:38-40?

[Small group report-back to plenary]

[In small groups again]
4. Jesus comes in to the temple at Mark 11:27 and leaves at Mark 13:2. Who are the characters in this section of text and what are the relationships between them? Draw a picture of the relationships to summarise your discussion and to share with the other groups.

[Small group report-back to plenary]

[In small groups again]
6. What does this text say to your context?
7. What will your group do in response to this Bible study? Devise an action plan.

[Small group report-back to plenary]

In what follows I will not describe what happens in a study like this, instead I will analyse the methodology inherent in such a Bible study.

53 For another example, with analytical commentary, see West, ‘Contextual Bible Study’ (n. 2).
The Bible studies the Ujamaa Centre is invited to facilitate by various faith-based organisations are all 'real' Bible studies, in that they form a part of the spiritual practices of that particular organisation or community. Furthermore, our Bible studies are all generated by a contextual theme or concern that emerges from that community. They are, in other words, a response to social analysis ('See'). They become a vehicle with which to 'Judge' reality, though the word 'Judge' perhaps gives a too simplistic sense of the Bible's role in the process of 'See-Judge-Act'. As Steve de Gruchy argues in his booklet on the 'See-Judge-Act' method, the term 'Judge' draws on Luke 12:56-57 in which Jesus rebukes the religious leaders of his day as hypocrites who are unable to interpret the present time and unable 'to judge' for themselves 'what is right'. This derivation then suggests that when we 'Judge', we look at the world (see) and then "judge for ourselves what is right", as Jesus is challenging us to do. As de Gruchy goes on to say, the Bible (along with our theological traditions) is a resource with which to 'Judge' what we have analysed in the 'See' phase. The whole 'Contextual Bible Study' process, then, can be seen as a process which exhibits links the 'See' and 'Act' phases.

The Bible study itself begins and ends with what we have called 'community consciousness' questions (questions 1, 5), 6 and 7 above). These questions tie the Bible study into the contexts of the participants, drawing on both their local knowledge and analysis and their interpretive resources. Our usual practice is to write-up on newspaper each and every response to Question 1. By so doing we indicate that we really do want to acknowledge the agency and contributions of the participants, and also capture the reception history of the particular text we are using.

The Bible study usually shifts its focus from the community to the text. Questions 2, 3, 4 and 5 each return the participants to the text, again and again. Having begun 'in front of the text', the interpretive process now focuses 'on the text'. These questions can only be addressed by a careful and close reading/hearing of the text. The biblical text now becomes a dialogue partner, but on its own terms. The text is given a literary dimension by these questions. The resources of literary biblical scholarship -- a focus on narrative point of view, character, setting, narrative structure, etc. -- are offered to the participants in a form that requires no input or instruction. The socially engaged scholar and their resources are present in the form of these questions, but the actual interpretive product belongs to the participants. Deliberately implicit in Question 4 is the option to go 'behind the text', into the socio-historical world that lies behind the text. In some of our Bible studies there is an overt question which draws the participants behind the text, and one could include such overt sub-questions in this Bible study, as sub-questions of Question 4, including for example the following: 'Who were the chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees in first century Palestine?' 'What was the socio-historical relationship between these different groups?' 'What was the history and function of the Jerusalem Temple in first century Palestine?' In our experience, however, there is no need for such questions, because a close and careful reading of the text usually generates socio-historical questions like these. The advantage of waiting for them to arise from a literary engagement with the text is that they are then the questions of the participants themselves. This further empowers them, in that they are asking their own questions of the text.

We have called Questions 2, 3, 4 and 5 'critical consciousness' questions. The use of the term 'critical' is a deliberate allusion to its use in academic discourse, whereby 'critical' we mean something like 'structured and systematic questioning'. Most ordinary non-scholarly interpreters of the Bible do not read the Bible in the structured and systematic manner that characterises biblical scholarship, and neither should they. They have their own interpretive resources. However, the work of the Ujamaa Centre, alongside the work of CEBI, the YCW, the Ilanzo Community Project in Amawati, South Africa, the People's Seminary in Burlington, Washington, USA, and other similar initiatives, has demonstrated a desire on the part of communities of the poor, working-class, and marginalised to have access to the resources of socially engaged biblical scholarship. The collaborative interpretive

21 de Gruchy, 'See-Judge-Act' (n. 36) 12.
22 For descriptions of each of these three modes of reading see B.C. Latane, 'Current Issues in the Hermeneutic Debate', Novum Testamentum 18 (1984); West, Biblical Hermeneutics (n. 2); O.G. West, Contextual Bible Study, Pietersburg: Cluster Publications, 1993.
process developed by the Ujamaa Centre is one way of sharing these resources.

Once the participants have engaged with the Bible in its textual and socio-historical dimensions, the process shifts back again to the contexts of the community, via the 'community consciousness' questions in Questions 5, 6, and 7. Having done social analysis of their context ('See'), the community invites the Ujamaa Centre to facilitate a Bible study with them related to this social theme. The 'Contextual Bible Study' provides a range of resources for both doing further social analysis ('See') and for engaging with this theme theologically ('Judge'). Finally, the process moves towards planning a response to the socially analyzed and theologically addressed content ('Act'). Questions 5, 6, and 7 move the process back into 'community consciousness', integrally linking each of the phases in the 'See-Judge-Act' process.

Having begun 'in front of the text', the process moves 'on the text', then 'behind the text', and finally back 'in front of the text'. There is, at the end of the process, a "fusion of horizons" between the biblical text (in both its literary and socio-historical dimensions) and the context of the interpreters. There was, of course, a fusion of horizons in the responses to Question 1, but by the end of the process the additional interpretive tools provided by biblical scholarship bring about a re-reading of the text and a fresh "fusion". Indeed, this second moment of "fusion" is closer to Hans-Georg Gadamer's use of the term, in which he argues that 'every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task', he goes on to say, "consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation, but consciously bringing it out".

This is precisely the 'critical' contribution of biblical scholarship to the 'Contextual Bible Study' process. The process begins with and retains the expected engagement between the believer and the Bible (through the initial 'community consciousness' question), but offers a more critical or 'tensive' encounter with the biblical text (through the literary and socio-historical resources in the 'critical consciousness' questions). The biblical text is given a voice of its own through these 'critical consciousness' questions, and is then brought back into conversation with the participants and their contexts by the final 'community consciousness' questions, changing their horizon in the exchange. In our experience within the Ujamaa Centre, these 'Contextual Bible Study' encounters with the Bible do bring about measurable effects in the participating communities. Our understanding is that the tools of biblical scholarship provide additional lines of connection between biblical horizons (whether literary or socio-historical) and the horizons of ordinary Bible readers.

Empowerment and social transformation

'Contextual Bible Study' provides non-scholarly interpreters with additional sites of engagement with the biblical text in at least three ways. First, it provides access to unfamiliar texts, that is texts which are neglected or suppressed by their church traditions, but which are part of the normal interpretive task for biblical scholars. Examples from our work in the Ujamaa Centre are 2 Samuel 13:1-22 and Job 3. Second, it provides access to unfamiliar literary units, even if component parts of the literary unit are familiar. The text we have been discussing, Mark 11:27-13:2, is a good example. Third, it provides ways of reading familiar texts in unfamiliar ways. The text our Bible study above begins with, Mark 12:41-44, read as part of the literary unit Mark 11:27-13:2 is a good example, as is our 'Contextual Bible Study' on the so-called 'Lord's prayer' (Matthew 6:9-13).

These additional areas of possible 'fusion' between text and context opened up by the additional resources of biblical scholarship (alongside the existing resources of the community) are significant in that they create a sacred, theological and ideological space in which to articulate these potential moments of tension. Unfamiliar texts, unfamiliar literary units, and familiar texts interpreted in unfamiliar ways all offer fresh theological vocabulary with which to articulate the 'historical consciousness' (Gadamer) or 'hermeneutics' (Pierre Bourdieu) of the

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Provincial Government on this issue. All the groups agreed that the first priority was for appropriately trained counsellors to be available within the churches. They recognised that for the church to be a safe place for those who were survivors of gender violence, the church would need to offer confidential counselling services.

A research tool

Indeed, so effective is ‘Contextual Bible Study’ that some have taken it up as a research tool. We in the Ujamaa Centre have resisted using it in this way. It is a part of our ongoing action-reflection praxis; specifically it is a resource we offer to the communities of the poor, working-class and marginalised with whom we work. We do not use it to do research, though we do reflect on it as a process and on its impact, as I have done above. But some have turned it into a research tool, using it to obtain access to the incipient and inchoate historical consciousness of a particular community.

This is a worrying development, but one which I will not probe here. I mention it in order to demonstrate the potential impact of this form of biblical interpretation.

Conclusion

‘Contextual Bible Study’ is a particular African manifestation of biblical interpretation. It is a regular part of the praxis of the Ujamaa Centre and so its contours are not fixed.\(^\text{59}\) It is constantly evolving, shaped by both the communities we work with and biblical scholarship. In this article I have revisited certain aspects of the ‘Contextual Bible Study’ process, concentrating on the contribution of biblical scholarship to a collaborative reading process between socially engaged biblical scholars and readers of the Bible in communities of the poor, working-class, and marginalised.

\(^{59}\) I have been reflecting on and writing about ‘Contextual Bible Study’ since 1989, and anyone who has followed my work will have noted the developing nature of both the practice and our understanding of it.