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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).<sup>1</sup> 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 exerted 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-

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#### Abbreviations used:

JTSA = *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*

YCW = Young Christian Workers

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. D. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1987.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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. And 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 hear 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> African American Black Theology,<sup>4</sup> Feminist Theology,<sup>5</sup> African Theology,<sup>6</sup> Tanzanian *Ujamaa* Theology,<sup>7</sup> and South African Black Theology<sup>8</sup> (to name those that have most impacted on the formation of 'Contextual Bible Study').

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed aspects of what I here call 'Contextual Bible Study' in earlier publications, including G.O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2003; idem, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, 2nd ed, Maryknoll NY and Pietermaritzburg, Orbis Books and Cluster Publications, 1995; idem, 'Contextual Bible Study in South Africa: A Resource for Reclaiming and Regaining Land, Dignity and Identity', in G.O. West and M.W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trends, and Trajectories*, Leiden, Brill, 2000. The praxis of the Ujamaa Centre, however, requires regular reconceptualisations of our work. This article is a recent attempt to do this.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. J.H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Towards a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology', in B. Mahan and L.D. Richesin (eds), *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Gabriel Setiloane, 'Where Are We in African Theology?' in K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (eds), *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, Accra, December 17-23, 1977*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1977.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. P. Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation*, Lund, Lund UP, 1988.

Alongside this genealogical thread was another, specifically related to the South African context. The South African apartheid state, with its overt theological foundation, demonised liberation theology and relentlessly detained anyone associated with such forms of theology. The term 'contextual theology' was coined to subvert the apartheid state's efforts, and became 'an umbrella term embracing a variety of particular or situational theologies' in South Africa.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, however, because of a lack of collaboration between Latin American-derived contextual theologies and Black Theology-derived liberation theologies,<sup>10</sup> 'contextual theology' in South Africa came to be considered both a very particular form of theology and a broad umbrella term for a host of prophetic and progressive theologies.

These two genealogical threads have lent their *name* to this particular form of community-based Bible study, but other genealogical impulses have guided its actual *praxis*. Among the most important of these is the contribution of South African Black Theology. A number of theoretical and praxiological impulses have directed the formation of 'Contextual Bible Study',<sup>11</sup> but the most important of these many impulses have come from South African Black Theology.<sup>12</sup> First, there is Takatso Mofokeng's provocative assertion that young blacks 'have categorically identified the Bible as an oppressive document by its very nature and to its very core' and have therefore gone on to suggest that the best option 'is to disavow the Christian faith and consequently be rid of the obnoxious Bible'.<sup>13</sup> Second, there is Imemeleng Mosala's claim that Black theologians like Allan Boesak and others 'have been surpassed by the largely illiterate black working class and poor peasantry who have defined the canon of Scripture, with its ruling class ideological basis, by appropriating the Bible in their own way using the cultural tools emerging out of their struggle for survival'.<sup>14</sup> Though neither of these scholars has pursued these points in any depth, Mosala has done some

8 E.g. I.J. Mosala, 'The Use of the Bible in Black Theology', in *idem* and Buti Tilagate (eds), *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1986.

9 'Editors' Preface', in M.T. Speckman and L.T. Kaufmann (eds), *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2001, xi.

10 J.R. Cochrane, 'Questioning Contextual Theology', *ibid.* 70-73; T.S. Maluleke, 'Theology in (South) Africa: How the Future Has Changed', *ibid.* 368.

11 West, *Academy of the Poor* (n. 2), 34-39.

12 West, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (n. 2).

13 T. Mofokeng, 'Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation', *Journal of Black Theology* 2 (1988) 40.

14 Mosala, 'The Use of the Bible' (n. 8) 184.

preliminary description and analysis of the reading practices of biblical interpretation in an African Independent church.<sup>15</sup> Their acknowledgement, even without detailed case study analysis of actual non-scholarly interpretive practice, is significant, for as Cornel West, the African-American public intellectual and theologian has argued,

Though Marxists have sometimes viewed oppressed people as political or economic agents, they have rarely viewed them as *cultural* agents. Yet without such a view there can be no adequate conception of the capacity of oppressed people – the capacity to change the world and sustain the change in an emancipatory manner. And without a conception of such capacity, it is impossible to envision, let alone create, a socialist society of freedom and democracy. It is, in part, the European Enlightenment legacy – the inability to believe in the capacities of oppressed people to create cultural products of value and oppositional groups of value – which stands between contemporary Marxism and oppressed people.<sup>16</sup>

South African Black Theology, while indebted to Marxist forms of analysis, particularly in Mosala's work,<sup>17</sup> has nevertheless not entirely bought into its claim that religion is the opiate of the people.<sup>18</sup>

This is a significant difference. The Scandinavian theologian Per Frostin has identified seven similarities between what he calls 'classical Marxism' and South African Black Theology and Tanzanian Ujamaa Theology:

- (1) concepts such as capitalism and imperialism; (2) a methodology and conceptuality to describe conflicts; (3) an analysis of the need for changes on a structural level; (4) a correspondence between actual existence and thought, seeing society as a whole with distinct but interrelated levels (as opposed to a compartmentalized view); (5) the transient character of capitalism; (6) the affinity between the interpretation of capitalism as idolatry and Marx's analysis of the economic system of fetishism (obviously influenced by the critique of idolatry in Judeo-Christian tradition); (7) an epistemology where praxis is a criterion of truth.<sup>19</sup>

However, Frostin goes on to argue, there are also a number of common differences between these two African forms of theology and classical Marxism. First, these two African theologies define the main

15 I.J. Mosala, 'Race, Class, and Gender as Hermeneutical Factors in the African Independent Churches' Appropriation of the Bible', *Semeia* 73 (1996).

16 Frostin, *Liberation Theology* (n. 7) 183; Cornel West, 'Religion and the Left: An Introduction', *Monthly Review* 36 (1984) 17.

17 I.J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989.

18 See specifically the comments by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, in Frostin, *Liberation Theology* (n. 7) 42; Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism: A Selection from Writings and Speeches 1952-65*, Dar es Salaam, Oxford UP, 1969, 14.

19 Frostin, *ibid.* 181-82.

theologian were maximised and the roles of the masses were minimised.<sup>27</sup> The South African context, socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians concurred, required a post-Marxist understanding of agency among the poor, working-class, and marginalised. The theoretical work of Jean and John Comaroff,<sup>28</sup> Michel de Certeau,<sup>29</sup> and James Scott,<sup>30</sup> among others, have been particularly useful in providing a vocabulary for talking about the kinds of biblical appropriation alluded to by Mofokeng and Mosala among ordinary South Africans.<sup>31</sup>

Because this genealogical thread, however, did not offer a practice in which socially engaged biblical scholars worked together with ordinary African Christian interpreters in poor, working-class, and marginalised communities, another genealogical thread was drawn upon in the formation of 'Contextual Bible Study'. This praxis orientated contribution came from South African Contextual Theology (and the upper case is appropriate for the particular form).

In its particular form, Contextual Theology, which borrowed many of its constituent elements from Latin American contexts and re-contextualised and popularized them in South Africa,<sup>32</sup> placed its emphasis on theological process rather than theological content. Characterising the work of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), Albert Nolan, one of the major proponents of Contextual Theology, said:

The Institute does not teach theology; it simply enables people to do their own theological reflection upon their own praxis and experience. The staff of ICT are active in bringing Christians together, facilitating discussion and

<sup>27</sup> On Sharon D. Welch's *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, in C. West (ed), *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture*, Grand Rapids / Trenton, Eerdmans / Africa World Press, 1988.

<sup>28</sup> J.L. Segundo, 'The Shift within Latin American Theology', *JTSA* 52 (1985) 22; idem, *Signs of the Times: Theological Reflections*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1993, 71-75; West, *The Academy of the Poor* (n. 2) 18-20.

<sup>29</sup> J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1, Chicago, U of Chicago Press, 1991, 13-39.

<sup>30</sup> M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, U of California Press, 1985; R.M. Petersen, *Time, Resistance, and Reconstruction: Rethinking Kairos Theology*, PhD U of Chicago, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven and London, Yale UP, 1990; idem, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> I have discussed their usefulness in detail in *The Academy of the Poor* (n. 2).

<sup>33</sup> L.T. Kaufmann, 'Good News to the Poor: The Impact of Albert Nolan on Contextual Theology in South Africa', in Speckman-Kaufmann (n. 9) *Towards an Agenda*.

contradiction in society as more complex and nuanced than does classical Marxism. 'In classical Marxism the main contradiction is analyzed in terms of classes, which are defined by their roles in production. Hence, capital and labour are the two opposite poles in the analysis of the contemporary "class struggle"'.<sup>20</sup> Even though capital-labour is clearly one dimension of their analysis of the African struggle, South African Black Theology and Tanzanian *Ujamaa* Theology adopt a multi-dimensional analysis of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed, which includes race, gender and culture (and most recently, and therefore not included by Frostin, HIV and AIDS).<sup>21</sup> Second, as has already been suggested, 'the cultural dimension of oppression is emphasized in [African] liberation theology far more than in classical Marxism',<sup>22</sup> which is what unites African forms of liberation theology. And third, as we have already noted, 'the circumstances that condition human thought are defined differently in classical Marxism than in [African] liberation theology, even though both represent a sociology of knowledge perspective'. Classical Marxism is clear that 'material production conditions human thought' while these two forms of African liberation theology are, again, more nuanced in their analysis.<sup>23</sup> For example, both South African Black Theology and Tanzanian *Ujamaa* Theology emphasise 'the creativity of the oppressed in a way that differs fundamentally from classical Marxism. The difference is especially striking when compared with the Marxist-Leninist theory of party where the cadres, the "conscious" elite, is seen as necessary tools to inculcate the masses with a revolutionary consciousness'.<sup>24</sup>

While 'agency of the oppressed discourse' is not unproblematic,<sup>25</sup> it provided and continues to provide a reorientation from the early dominant trends in Latin American Liberation Theology (and white Feminist Theology)<sup>26</sup> in which the roles of the biblical scholar and

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 182.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 182-83.

<sup>25</sup> T.S. Maluleke, 'The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans: An Emerging Paradigm of Post-Cold War and Post-Apartheid Black and African Theology', *JTSA* 108 (2000); idem, 'The Valdez Mission Station, Then and Now: A Missiological Appraisal', *Missionalia* 31 (2003) 173-74; idem and S. Nadar, 'The Agency of the Oppressed Discourse: Consciousness, Liberation and Survival in Theological Perspective', *JTSA* 120 (2004); idem and idem, 'Alien Fraudsters in the White Academy: Agency in Gendered Colour', *ibid. ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> See Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation*, New York, Orbis, 1985; and the critique by Cornel West,

action, recording what people say, and doing whatever research may be required to support the reflections, arguments and actions of the people.<sup>33</sup>

*The Kairos Document*,<sup>34</sup> for example, was produced using this general method.<sup>35</sup> But it was the process rather than the product that was consistently foregrounded in Contextual Theology, and this process was formalised in the 'See-Judge-Act' method (which was developed by Fr. Joseph Cardijn in the 1930s in Belgium, where he was working as a chaplain among factory workers).<sup>36</sup> In the words of James Cochrane, one of the founders of the Institute for Contextual Theology, 'one of the proponent of and commentator on Contextual Theology, 'one of the basic genres of contextual theology propagated in South Africa, preeminently by Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Students and Albert Nolan, comes in the guise of the tripartite command to "see-judge-act"'.<sup>37</sup> In practice, McGlory Speckman and Larry Kaufmann tell us, this method 'meant starting with a social analysis, then proceeding to the reading of the [biblical] text and then to action'.<sup>38</sup> 'Seeing' involves careful social analysis of a particular context at a particular time, what was referred to as 'reading the signs of the times'. 'Judging', which precedes acting, but which is based on having acted already, 'requires that we analyse the conditions of oppression in our context'. The 'acting' which then follows 'is enriched twice over by the first two discursive moves of seeing and judging'. The assumption is that the subsequent action 'is both better informed as a result, and more effective'.<sup>39</sup>

As indicated, one of the proponents of this method was the Young Christian Workers (YCW), and a brief examination of their practice will make it clearer how this method incorporated the Bible. The YCW takes as its starting point the lives of young 'workers', whether employed or not, the majority of whom are black Africans. YCW is not a union but a movement for education situated within the working-class and the unemployed. The fundamental process of YCW groups is the 'See-Judge-Act' method. Young workers begin by analysing the conditions experienced by themselves and their friends at work, at home and at

<sup>33</sup> A. Nolan, 'Kairos Theology', in J.W. de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds), *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1994, 212.

<sup>34</sup> Kairos theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church*, Revised 2nd ed, Braamfontein, Skotaville, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> Nolan (n. 33) 213.

<sup>36</sup> See S. de Gruchy, 'See-Judge-Act: Putting Faith into Action', unpublished booklet, undated.

<sup>37</sup> Cochrane, 'Questioning Contextual Theology' (n. 10) 76.

<sup>38</sup> 'Introduction' in Speckman-Kaufmann, *Towards an Agenda* (n. 9) 4.

<sup>39</sup> Cochrane, 'Questioning Contextual Theology' (n. 10) 77.

school ('See'). They assess the situation 'in the light of the Gospel' ('Judge'), and then try to improve the situation by taking appropriate action to change conditions ('Act').<sup>40</sup>

The Bible plays a significant role in the life of YCW. Some workers, it is stated, 'started to believe in [the] bible again when they came to YCW through action'.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the Bible becomes relevant again to these workers through the relating of action and faith within the YCW.<sup>42</sup> In addition to the renewed relevance of the Bible in the experience of individual workers, there is also the ongoing use of the Bible in the 'See-Judge-Act' method itself. In particular, with the YCW a biblical text is usually used in the pivotal 'Judge' part.<sup>43</sup> For example, in reflecting on 'wage negotiations' a particular YCW group studied Exodus 18:13-23 in the 'Judge' part of the method.<sup>44</sup>

However, within the YCW, the biblical text is read in a specific way. It is read from a socio-historical perspective, with the socio-historical reconstructions of scholars like Norman Gottwald<sup>45</sup> being provided in simplified forms. For example, the 'History of Salvation' presents a three page sketch beginning with 1250 BCE and ending with the work of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> This kind of information is often provided in an integrated manner with particular texts. For example, in a study of Moses the biblical 'story' is retold in a creative manner which includes such information.<sup>47</sup>

This structured reading environment used in the YCW is derived, in part, from various Latin American Bible 'movements', among which the most significant is probably that of the Centro de Estudos Bíblicos (CEBI) in Brasil. A common feature in these interpretive practices is the reliance on reading the Bible from the perspective of scholarly socio-

<sup>40</sup> I.D. Stevens, *The Role of the Church in Industry and Industrial Relations: Focusing on the Supportive Role with Worker Organisations, Especially the Independent Trade Unions in South Africa*, Honours, U of Natal, 1985, 25-26.

<sup>41</sup> Young Christian Workers, 'National Team Meeting Programme 15-28 August 1987', Durban, YCW National Secretariate, 1987, 16.

<sup>42</sup> See J.M. Dumortier, *Many in This City Are My People: Young Christian Workers*, Durban, YCW, 1983.

<sup>43</sup> Young Christian Workers, 'Team Meeting 20-30 September 1988', Durban, YCW, 1988, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Young Workers, 'Leaders' Notes: Special Edition', Durban: YCW, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> N.K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1985; idem, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1979.

<sup>46</sup> Young Christian Workers, 'History of Salvation', Durban: YCW, undated.

<sup>47</sup> For more detailed information on the reading practices of the YCW see West, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (n. 2) 188-193.

historical reconstructions,<sup>48</sup> though there are signs that CEBI's reading practices are becoming more varied.<sup>49</sup> An emphasis on socio-historical reconstruction, also a feature of Mosala's Black hermeneutics and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist hermeneutics,<sup>50</sup> 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,<sup>51</sup> one of the founders of this form of collaborative praxis.

However, worries about allocating the intellectual, organic or not,<sup>52</sup> 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

<sup>48</sup> See C. Mesters, 'The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People', in N.K. Gottwald and R.A. Horsley (eds), *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1984; idem, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, ET F. McDonagh, Maryknoll NY, Orbis, 1989; West, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (n. 2) 216-19.

<sup>49</sup> C.A. Dreher, *The Walk to Emmaus*, Svo Leopoldo, Centro de Estudos Bíblicos, 2004.

<sup>50</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London, SCM, 1983; Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (n. 17).

<sup>51</sup> See especially G.H. Wittenberg, *Prophecy and Protest: A Contextual Introduction to Israelite Prophecy*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 1993.

<sup>52</sup> For some discussion on this distinction see G.O. West, 'Explicating Domination and Resistance: A Dialogue between James C. Scott and Biblical Scholars', in R.A. Horsley (ed), *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, Semeta Studies, Atlanta / Leiden, SBL / Brill, 2004, 190-192.

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:<sup>53</sup>

[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?
3. Now read Mark 13:1-2. What are the connections between Mark 12:41-44 and Mark 13:1-2?

[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]

5. Summarise in one sentence what Mark is saying in Mark 11:27-13:2.
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,<sup>54</sup> instead I will analyse the methodology inherent in such a Bible study.

<sup>53</sup> For another example, with analytical commentary, see West, 'Contextual Bible Study' (n. 2).

<sup>54</sup> For a description see G.O. West, 'The Bible and Economics: Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections from South Africa', *African Journal of Biblical Studies*

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.<sup>55</sup> The whole 'Contextual Bible Study' process, then, can be seen as a process which integrally links the 'See' and the '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 newsprint each and every response to Question 1. By so doing we indicate that we really do want to acknowledge their agency and consider their contributions. The recorded responses to Question 1 not only affirm the agency and dignity of the participants, they also capture the reception history of the particular text we are using.

The Bible study then 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',<sup>56</sup> 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

20 (2004) 109-21; idem, 'Kairos 2000: Moving Beyond Church Theology', *JTSA* 108 (2000).

<sup>55</sup> de Gruchy, 'See-Judge-Act' (n. 36) 12.

<sup>56</sup> For descriptions of each of these three modes of reading see B.C. Lategan, 'Current Issues in the Hermeneutic Debate', *Neotestamentica* 18 (1984); West, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (n. 2); G.O. West, *Contextual Bible Study*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993.

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.<sup>57</sup> However, the work of the Ujamaa Centre, alongside the work of CEBI, the YCW, the Ilimo Community Project in Amawoti, South Africa,<sup>58</sup> the People's Seminary in Burlington, Washington, USA,<sup>59</sup> 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

<sup>57</sup> G.O. West, 'Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa; Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy', *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002).

<sup>58</sup> G. Philpott, *Jesus Is Tricky and God Is Undemocratic: The Kin-Dom of God in Amawoti*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 1993.

<sup>59</sup> B. Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

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 analysed and theologically addressed context ('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 so 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'.<sup>60</sup>

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

<sup>60</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York, Seabury Press, 1975, 273; see also the discussion in A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: The New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultman, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*, Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 1980, 307-310.

exchange.<sup>61</sup> In our experience within the Ujamaa Centre, these 'Contextual Bible Study' encounters with the Bible do bring about measurable effects in the participating communities.<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup> 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).<sup>64</sup>

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 tensive fusion. 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 'habitus' (Pierre Bourdieu)<sup>65</sup> of the

<sup>61</sup> Gadamer *ibid.* 271.

<sup>62</sup> See for example G.O. West *et al.*, 'Rape in the House of David: The Biblical Story of Tamar as a Resource for Transformation', *Agenda* 61 (2004).

<sup>63</sup> G.O. West and Bong Zengele, 'Reading Job "Positively" in the Context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa', *Concilium* 4 (2004); G.O. West and P. Zondi-Mabizela, 'The Bible Story That Became a Campaign: The Tamar Campaign in South Africa (and Beyond)', *Ministerial Formation* 103 (2004).

<sup>64</sup> G.O. West, 'Articulating, Owning and Mainstreaming Local Theologies: The Contribution of Contextual Bible Study', *JTSA* 122 (2005).

<sup>65</sup> I have discussed the possible usefulness of Bourdieu's work in understanding aspects of the 'Contextual Bible Study' process in G.O. West, 'Newsprint Theology: Working with the Bible in the Context of HIV and Aids', in C. Pearson and J. Havea (eds), *Out of Place*, London, Equinox Publishing, forthcoming.



community. Those aspects of their historical consciousness not engaged with by their familiar theological sites (whether their church, their parish groups, or their individual Bible reading) are activated by the unfamiliar dimensions of the biblical text offered through the 'Contextual Bible Study' process.

If activated and if articulated, and the latter depends on how safe the Bible study workshop site is, there is then the possibility for a communal owning of what has been articulated. This communal ownership of a previously unarticulated aspect of a community's historical consciousness or embodied experience is recognised to be both empowering and potentially transformative for their social situation. For example, our 'Contextual Bible Study' work with the story of the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22) has done both. Using funding specifically given for the purpose of gauging the impact of this 'Contextual Bible Study' by the South African Foundation for Human Rights, the Ujamaa Centre conducted research into the impact of the Tamar 'Contextual Bible Study' in two sites, an urban and a rural site. In each site we conducted three workshops. The first workshop in each site did a survey concerning the church's understanding of gender violence. The second workshop in each site was the actual Tamar 'Contextual Bible Study', and the third workshop then measured the impact of the Tamar 'Contextual Bible Study' some months after the second workshop.

The Tamar 'Contextual Bible Study' clearly provides a vocabulary with which to talk about a lived experience which is not normally talked about 'in church'. In each community we divided the participants into four small groups, one consisting of older women, one consisting of older men, one consisting of younger women, and one consisting of younger men. Our research showed quite clearly a measurable impact. First, all the groups have owned the issue of gender violence. This is most marked in the responses by the older men. This group was initially quite defensive in their responses. However, after the 'Contextual Bible Study' there was no hint of defensiveness at all among either the older or younger men. Indeed, these males groups were able to enter, without reservation, into the contours of a theology of those who have been raped. One of the remarkable features of the Bible study on 2 Samuel 13:1-22 is that it has the capacity to reach men in a way that bypasses their usual defensive response to the issue of gender violence. The ownership of the issue among the women was more nuanced, as one would expect. The men have had to move quite substantially, whereas the women were already committed to the issue of gender violence. For the older women the Bible study provided resources with which to explore and analyse the social construction of gender, and this is an

enduring aspect of their appropriation. For the younger women the Bible study clearly dispelled the notion that women who are raped 'were asking for it'. The impact of the Bible study for them is that they are able to move beyond having to defend women from such charges and into a more in-depth analysis of the effects of abuse on women.

Second, the Tamar 'Contextual Bible Study' has totally transformed the discourse of the churches. All the groups agreed that the church was a place in which 'these things' were never discussed. Not only was the church not a safe place to speak of these matters, if gender violence was discussed, it was to condemn the victim/survivor herself. By the end of our research process each church has not only become a site in which 'these things' can be discussed, it has become a safer place too. The disclosure of one of the younger women in her group (in the urban church site), knowing that this would be reported to the congregation as a whole, is testimony to this.

Third, and closely related to the above points, the Tamar 'Contextual Bible Study' has given resources for a theological engagement with the issue of gender violence. Each of the groups, particularly the older men, the younger women and the younger men, grappled with the question of a theology of rape. The older women, while not dealing with this question directly, raised probing questions about the androcentric nature of the Bible and representation of God. The 'Contextual Bible Study' provided resources not only to engage with the issue of violence against women, it also enabled them to interrogate their faith. This is a remarkable achievement for a resource, the Bible, that comes from and is central to their faith tradition.

Fourth, an important impact of the Tamar 'Contextual Bible Study' was to move the groups to action. Every group spent substantial time preparing an action plan. The 'Contextual Bible Study' was not simply interesting information; it was a call to action. The older women focussed on actions to be taken within the church, taking individual responsibility to pray against 'this sickness' and taking corporate responsibility to establish structures within the church. The older men focussed almost entirely on the need for appropriate structures in the church to address violence against women, including macro-ecclesial structures to do with the training of ministers. The younger women emphasised the need for psycho-spiritual resources, and the younger men focussed on the need for structured support structures in the church, possibly using the existing guild structures of the church as a resource. The younger men also went further than the other groups, arguing that the church needed to establish an educational programme, and that they should work together with Non Governmental Organisations and the

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.<sup>66</sup> 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.

<sup>66</sup> 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.