



WORKING WITH THE BIBLE AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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CONTEXTUAL FORMATION

- In the midst of the anti-apartheid struggle in the late 1980s, while socially engaged biblical were involved in various aspects of the struggle, the call came from marginalised communities of faith to hear God speak from a 'silent Bible' into this crisis-Kairos moment.
- 'Contextual Bible Study' (CBS) was born among real marginalised people.
- Contextual Bible Study was shaped by a range of theological traditions, including South African Contextual Theology and Black Theology, Latin American Liberation Theology, particularly 'the Popular Reading of the Bible', Feminist/Womanist Theology, Ujamaa Theology, North American Black Theology, as well as the Worker Priest Movement.

- But, fundamentally, Contextual Bible Study has been shaped by the praxis of the past thirty years – of actual CBS work and reflection on it.
- New contexts confront us, each with their local communities of the poor and marginalised and their associated sites of struggle.
- Contextual Bible Study continues to ‘learn from below’, to be ‘born again’ again, from below.
- Increasingly we have discerned that we should be more overt about the Bible itself as a site of struggle, particularly as this is no longer as clear as it was in the struggle against apartheid.
- Contextual Bible Study engages a state/church ‘co-opted’ Bible, limiting the Bible’s voice to the individual, personal, and moral.

CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY

- Contextual Bible Study is a collaborative praxis in which the already present Bible is re-read communally and critically, within a faith-full setting, drawing on the local interpretive resources of particular organised communities of the poor and marginalised and the critical interpretive resources of socially engaged biblical studies, working together for systemic social and theological transformation.
- Contextual Bible Study has 6 core values:
 - Community
 - Criticality
 - Collaboration
 - Change
 - Context
 - Contestation

Summarizing 'Contextual Bible Study' (CBS)

CBS begins with the
reality, experience and resources of the community ...
'community-consciousness' = people's theology

SEE

In-between we re-read the Bible,
slowly, carefully and closely
using the critical resources of biblical scholarship ...
'critical consciousness'

=

Thematic-semiotic (in-front-of-text)
Literary-narrative (on-text)
Socio-historical (behind-text)
Thematic-semiotic (in-front-of-text)

JUDGE

... and ends with the
reality, experience and resources of the community ...
'community-consciousness' = prophetic theology

ACT

A CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY

- 1. Read Mark 12:41-44. What is the text about?
- 2. Now read Mark 12:38-40. What are the connections between 12:41-44 and 12:38-40?
- 3. Now read Mark 13:1-2. What are the connections between 12:38-44 and 13:1-2?
- 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.

- **5. What was the role of the temple in the time of Jesus?**
- **6. Summarise in one sentence what Mark is saying in Mark 11:27-13:2.**
- **7. What does this text say to your context?**
- **8. What actions will you plan in response to this Bible study?**

BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS: ANALYSIS

- 1. Listen to Mark 12:41-44.
What is the text about?
- This community consciousness question draws on the interpretive resources and local knowledge of participants.
- Thematic, in-front-of-the-text engagement, offers a safe space for any and all responses, including a sense of the reception history of this text in this community.

- 2. Now read Mark 12:38-40. What are the connections between 12:41-44 and 12:38-40?
- 3. Now read Mark 13:1-2. What are the connections between 12:41-44 and 13:1-2?
- 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.
- Critical consciousness questions invite a constant return to the biblical text to re-read it carefully, closely, and slowly.
- These questions encourage the capacity to recognise and engage with the text's literary structure and narrative features.
- The drawing exercise engages the non-verbal capacities of the group.
- The narrative detail of the text may generate socio-historical questions.



PHARISEES



Temple authority

Scribes

Widow



Crowd



JESUS



DISCIPLES



- Chief Priests

Herodians





UTTERLY AMAZED!



- 5. What was the role of the temple in the time of Jesus?
- 6. Summarise in one sentence what Mark is saying in Mark 11:27-13:2.
- Question 5 invites socio-historical questions from participants as CBS moves from 'internal' (literary) to 'external' (socio-historical) detail.
- The facilitator offers socio-historical resources as a response to the narrative-generated questions of the participants.
- The summary helps participants to capture their own 'thematic' understanding of a complex text.
- These questions partially reintroduce community consciousness.

- 7. What does this text say to your context?
- 8. What actions will you plan in response to this Bible study?
- Community consciousness questions return the CBS to the resources and realities of the participants, but via a re-read text.
- The Bible study begins and ends with community consciousness.
- The Bible study belongs to the community.
- The action plan is under their control.

THE TAMAR BIBLE STUDY, 2 SAMUEL 13:1-22

- 1. Listen to 2 Samuel 13:1-22. Have you heard this scripture read publically before? What you think the text is about?
- 2. Who are the main characters in this story and what do we know about them?
- 3. What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?
- 4. What does Tamar say and what does Tamar do?

- **5. Are there women like Tamar in your church and/or community? Tell their story.**
- **6. What resources are there in your area for survivors of rape?**
- **7. What will you now do in response to this Bible study?**

IN SEARCH OF REDEEMPTIVE MASCULINITIES

- 1. Listen to the text being read. Have you heard this text read publicly, in church, ... on a Sunday? Share your experiences of this text with each other.
- 2. Who are the characters and what do we know about each of them?
- 3. What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?

- 4. How would you characterise Amnon's masculinity? What kind of man is Amnon?
- Consider:
 - What prevents Amnon initially from acting on his 'love' for Tamar (v2)?
 - What is it that changes Amnon's 'love' (v1) to 'sickness' (v2), and what then enables him to act on his sickness/lust (v4-6)?
 - How does he react to Tamar's attempts to reason/argue with him (v12-14)?
 - How does he behave after he has raped Tamar (v15-17)?

- 5. What kind of man does Tamar expect or hope Amnon to be? What kind of man could Amnon be according to Tamar?
- Consider:
 - What does she say (v12-13,16), and what do each of the things she says tell us about her understanding of what it means to be 'a man'? Pay attention to each thing she says.
 - What does she do (v19), and what do each of things she does tell us about her understanding of what it means to be 'a man'?

- **Question 6: What are the dominant forms of masculinity in our contexts (in each age group), and what alternative forms of masculinity can we draw on from our cultural and religious traditions?**
- **Question 7: How can we raise the issue of masculinity in our various gender and age-groups?**
 - **Action plan 1: an immediate plan of action for your context**
 - **Action plan 2: a more long-termed action plan**
 - **Action plan 3: a ‘dream’ action plan**

SITES OF STRUGGLE

- The biblical narrative remains constrained by patriarchy.
- But there are indications in the text, and certainly in our context, of a distant/distinct feminist voice.
- Focusing on this 'source' text, we minimise the male-oriented focus of the larger narrative in 2 Samuel, where the focus is clearer on male monarchic dynastic succession.
- Praxis moves us from a focus on gender-based violence against women to the potential for redemptive masculinities.

SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMIC REALITY

- "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist" (Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara, Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop, 1964-1985).
- The Ujamaa Centre asks the 'why?' question.
- See: analysis of economic systems 'from below', working with organised communities of the unemployed.
- The dominant theological tradition of our churches blames the unemployed for being unemployed. Unemployment is seen as an individual reality, not a systemic reality.

JUDGE: CREATING A CBS

- Judge: reflecting on the (systemic) economic dimensions of the Bible
- Re-reading the Bible from the lived reality of the unemployed enables us to see the economic dimensions of scripture.
- Some examples:
 - The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)
 - The story of Joseph (Genesis 47:13-26)
 - The parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15)

“WHY ARE YOU STANDING IDLE?”

- 1. Listen to a reading of *Matthew 20:1-16*. What is this text from scripture about?
- 2. Who are the characters in this text and what are their relationships to each other? Draw a picture of these relationships.

- 3. In the time of Jesus many peasant farmers had been forced off their land by becoming indebted to wealthy city-based elites from whom they had taken loans in times of economic hardship. Those who lost their land through indebtedness became day-labourers. So there are two very different ways of reading this text:
- A. This text can be read as presenting the egalitarian 'socialist' vision of Jesus and the early Jesus movement (Acts 4:32-35), where there is work for all and decent wages for all. As Karl Marx said, "From each according to their ability to each according to their needs". From this perspective, we might read the parable as a utopian vision of a 'socialist' society.
- B. This text can also be read as a critique by Jesus of the arbitrary and discriminating practices of 'capitalist' landowners, who hire when they like and pay what they like. From this perspective, the workers do not receive a just wage, they receive the exploitative minimum daily rate, and no more.

- A: a 'socialist' interpretation

- 4. If the landowner represents the egalitarian communal vision of Jesus and the kingdom of God, what is the relationship between the landowner and the workers in this text? Focus on the detail of the text.
- 5. What aspects of this parable are relevant to the current context of unemployment?

- B: a 'capitalist' interpretation

- 4. If the landowner represents the exploitative ruling economic elite in the first century, what is the relationship between the landowner and the workers in this text? Focus on the detail of the text.
- 5. What aspects of this parable are relevant to the current context of unemployment?

- **7. What do each of these two different readings say to our context?**
- **8. In what ways can you work within your context for just economic systems?**

LIVING WITH AND LEARNING FROM HIV

- 1. Job 1:21, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”, is a biblical text often read at funerals. Why do pastors and priests read this biblical verse at funerals? What does it say about people who have died of AIDS-related illnesses and what does it say to people living with HIV and AIDS?

- 2. Listen to Job 3. What is Job trying to say in this text? What images or metaphors does Job use in his lament?
- 3. How does this text resonate with people living with HIV? Which of Job's images or metaphors are particularly relevant?
- 4. What is God's view of how Job has spoken in chapter 3 (and elsewhere)? Read Job 42:7.
- 5. What would be your own version of Job 3? Share it with those in the group.
- 6. How can you share your version of Job 3 with your family, your local church or your community?



- 1. Use Azariah Mbatha's woodcut to remind you of the Joseph story. What, according to Mbatha, is the story about?
- 2. The Joseph story does not end with the reuniting of Joseph's family. Can you remember what comes after this in the biblical story?
- 2. As Prime Minister of Egypt, appointed by Pharaoh, Joseph implements plans to deal with the years of plenty and the years of famine. Read Genesis 41:46-49. How did Joseph get the grain which he stored? During the famine, what did Joseph do with the stored grain?
- 3. Read 47:13-21. What must the people do in order to get grain from Joseph?
- 4. Draw another panel to add to Mbatha's that captures these texts.
- 5. What alternative forms of redistribution could Joseph have used?
- 6. What should be the role of government in land allocation and reallocation?
- 7. How will you lobby and advocate for this?

STRUGGLING FOR THE WORD OF GOD

- Contextual Bible Study takes sides with the 'God of life' against the 'idols of death'.
- CBS helps to construct a safe and sacred space in which to hear God speak from a Bible that is strangely silent in the public realm about systemic issues.
- CBS is collaborative, believing that ordinary African believers are able to discern kin struggles within the biblical sites of struggle, and that the resources of socially engaged biblical studies have a significant facilitating role to play.
- CBS, we believe, builds interpretive resilience. ...