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Ujamaa Centre
for Biblical and Theological
Community Development and Research

formerly
The Institute for the Study of the Bible
&
Worker Ministry
Project

Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual

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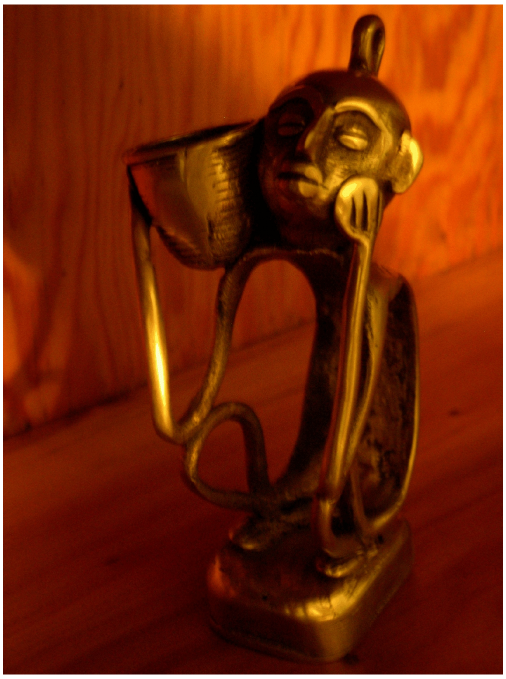


The following Bible studies are designed to introduce the basic hermeneutical and pedagogical principles of contextual Bible study. Each of these Bible studies has been shaped extensively by communities of the poor and marginalised in South Africa, and come from real life contexts.

Introduction to this Manual

This Manual has been produced by more than fifteen years of Contextual Bible Study. We have not only done Contextual Bible Study for more than fifteen years, we have also reflected on Contextual Bible Study for more than fifteen years. So this Manual is the product of **praxis** – a cycle of action and reflection. As we have sought to use the Bible as a resource for transformation in our context, we have done many hundreds of Bible studies in may hundreds of different contexts, most of them among black South Africans. But we have not just done Bible study, we have also tried to understand what we have done and why we have done it. In this way we have reflected on each and every Bible study. 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 different ways.

The picture on the front cover is of a bronze-caste figure I bought in Kolkata, India. To me it represents 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.

The Manual is designed as a **pedagogical tool**. 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 collects and brings together a number of Bible studies we have done, presenting them in a way that enables others to do them.

This Manual is not, however, a model answer. The Bible studies and the reflections on them are guides. Each one of them has itself been through a long process of revision and refinement. We have learned by doing, and so must you. You must make these Bible studies your own. You must be flexible in your use of them, adapting them for your context, and constructing others like these that will 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 decide whether these methods are of use to your context or not. Contextual Bible Study is not a **method** in a strong sense, but it is a carefully reflected process which this Manual attempts to explain.

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 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 moves to the Bible to allow the Bible to speak to (Judge) the context, and then moves to the participants planning a course of action arising from the Bible study (Act). Contextual Bible Study is similar.

This Manual 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 Contextual Bible Study process

Key to all forms of contextual Bible study (in the broadest sense) is **facilitation**. Bible study which strives to be collaborative depends on a leadership style that facilitates. We are all to familiar with dominating forms of leadership. These styles of leadership are inappropriate for Contextual Bible Study. The leader must be a facilitator. Briefly, the facilitator is someone who enables the group to work together collaboratively, sharing their resources and coming to some common action. Some of the things that the facilitator does to enable the group to work together collaboratively are:

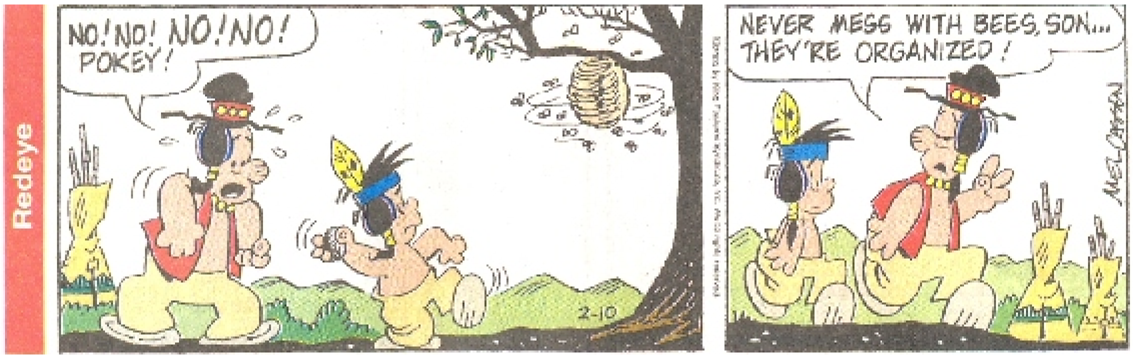
- The facilitator should use an 'ice-breaker' exercise before the Bible study to help people to get to know one-another. For example, people can be asked to join 'taxis' of a particular number; each time this is done those in the 'taxi' are asked to say something about themselves.
- The facilitator should divide the group up into small groups – this 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 of 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. If it is best to mix up the participants, then a simple numbering of participants can be used: 1,2,3 ... 1,2,3 ... 1,2,3 etc.
- The facilitator should write up the responses of the participants and their group reports. The facilitator does not have to do this him/herself, but he/she must make sure it is done.
- The facilitator should make sure that the Bible study questions are allocated sufficient time for group discussion, and then for reportback. If time is short, the facilitator need not ask each group to report on every question; instead the facilitator can rotate reportback, allowing each group a chance to lead the reportback on a question, and then asking the other groups only to report on what has not already been covered by the other groups.
- The facilitator should manage conflict. 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.
- The facilitator should keep the Bible study process moving forward to the conclusion.
- 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, then he/she should say so! It is better to go and find the information than to pretend.
- The facilitator is just one voice in the Contextual Bible Study, so the facilitator needs to defer to the group, even if he/she does not like what the group is saying. This does not mean that the facilitator does not have a voice, but it does mean that their voice is not the most important voice. The overall purpose is group collaboration.

Having discussed the importance of facilitation, we now move to the Bible study itself.

Much of what is discussed below will make more sense once you have actually participated in a Contextual Bible Study or once you have gone through some of the examples which are included in this Manual. However, some orientation to the Contextual Bible Study process is appropriate at this point.

We can identify **five steps in the construction of a Contextual Bible Study**.

Step 1
Contextual Bible Study always begins with the reality of the local community. So Contextual Bible Study 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 context.


Redeye
NO! NO! NO! NO! POKEY!
2-10
NEVER MESS WITH BEES, SON... THEY'RE ORGANIZED!
MEL CASSON

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.

Step 2
Once the theme/s are determined, the actual planning of the Bible study can start. Now that we have theme, we now need to find a **biblical text** that may speak into this theme. The Ujamaa Centre is guided by two main principles here. While we can and do read the texts the community chooses, we also bring to them texts and resources they are less familiar with. So we read familiar texts in unfamiliar ways (by approaching them differently), or we read unfamiliar texts (those texts that are neglected or forgotten).

Reading familiar texts in unfamiliar ways and reading unfamiliar texts allows participants to engage with aspects and parts of the biblical tradition that they have previously not had access to. In this way, the Contextual Bible Study process enables the group to establish **lines of connection** between their context and aspects and parts of the Bible which they do not usually have access to.

Step 3
Once the biblical text has been chosen, the task of constructing the Bible study itself begins.

We typically use two kinds of Contextual Bible Study questions. We always begin and end the Bible study with **contextual questions** (or what we have also called community consciousness questions – because they draw on the resources of the community). Such questions draw on the lived experience and the embodied theologies of the participants. These contextual questions provide the framework of the Bible study.

Within this frame of contextual questions, we construct carefully formulated **textual questions** (or what we have also called critical consciousness questions – because they draw on the systematic and structured resources of biblical scholarship). These are questions which draw on the resources of biblical scholarship and which force the groups to constantly engage with the biblical text. 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 can be characterised as consisting of 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). We begin with an in front of the text mode of reading, asking participants what they think the text is about. Here they are asked to draw on their own understandings of the what the text projects towards them. We then usually move to a focus on the text, allowing the text to have a voice among the voices of the participants. Questions which draw readers into a close, careful and slow reading of the text are used here. Next, we allow questions from the participants to probe the world behind the text, as they draw on the resources of biblical scholarship to provide detail to the socio-historical context of the text. Finally, we return to examine again what the text now projects to us as participants.

Literary questions slow down the reading process,[1] enabling the participants to read the text more carefully and closely than they usually do. Literary questions also open up the narrative world to the reader, inviting the reader to enter and locate themselves in this world. The socio-historical questions of the participants often arise from their desire to know more about the socio-historical detail of this narrative world they have entered [myth paper].

Having heard the voice of the text in its own world (the world of the text and the world behind the text that produced the text) we now allow the text to speak afresh to us.

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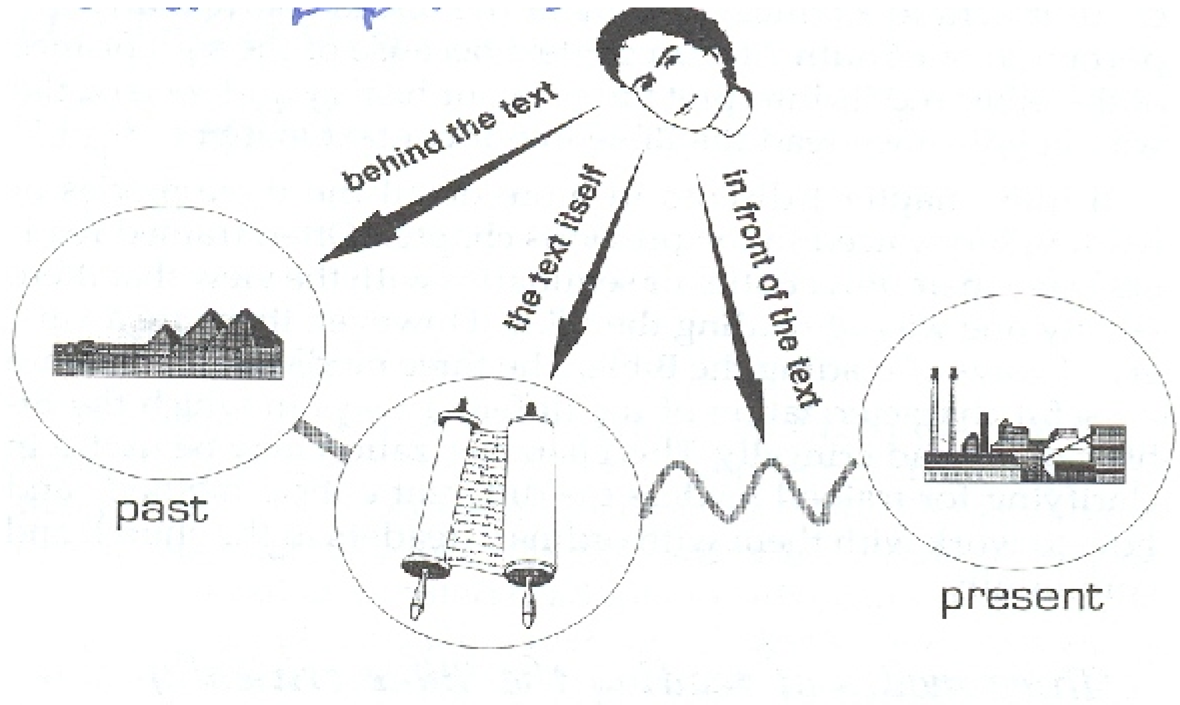
[1] John Riches from the Contextual Bible Study Group in Glasgow, Scotland, talks of the need to slow down the reading process, allowing readers more time with the text. Critical consciousness questions do this (see also Society and Group 2005).



It is the **combination of contextual and textual questions** that constitutes the Contextual Bible Study method. By fusing community consciousness with critical consciousness, the text speaks anew to our realities.

Step 4
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** theological understandings of 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 often leads to 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 lived theologies. When they do so, others in the group may be encouraged to do similarly. It is when there is an overlap between individual embodied theologies that the group is empowered to 'own' the theology being expressed as their own. In most cases, participants from marginalised contexts have very little opportunity to test out whether their own embodied theology is shared by any one else. Contextual Bible Study provides this opportunity to try out 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. Alas, this seldom happens. The Contextual Bible Study process provides an opportunity for this.

Step 5

Contextual Bible Study always ends with action. Each small group, and the larger group which they make up, is required to 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 the kingdom of God may come on earth, as in heaven! Because the Bible study empowers participants to articulate and own local contextual theologies there is now 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 what cannot be done in their local contexts. Certain actions may not be possible within the constraints of their context; however, this should not prevent some kind of possible action being planned.

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.

The contextual Bible study method cannot accomplish this move on its own, and so following most contextual Bible studies participants are provided with additional resources from non-governmental, governmental, and community-based organisations.

Bible study 1
Mark 12:41-44

Introduction
The Ujamaa Centre is an organisation that locates itself in the interface between biblical studies in the academy and ordinary African 'readers' (whether literate or not) of the Bible in local communities of faith. Typically, the Ujamaa Centre is approached by a particular group to participate with them in Bible study or theological reflection. When invited, staff in the Ujamaa Centre, most of whom are 'organic intellectuals', coming as they do from among the poor, working class, and marginalised,[2] first ascertain whether the invitation comes from a group that already has some degree of structured organization. Organized groups tend to have a stronger sense of identity than unorganized groups and 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 with them and to 'talk back' to the Ujamaa Centre. Implicit in any participation with church and/or community based groups are complex matrices of power, and so the Ujamaa Centre prefers to work with groups which have a fairly clear idea of what they want from a particular project, what resources they themselves bring to the project, and which will not be intimidated by the presence of Ujamaa Centre staff and their resources. A key commitment of the Ujamaa Centre is to work within the reality of the group, as it is experienced and understood by the group.

If the invitation comes from an unorganized group or if the organized group has only a vague idea of the project, then the Ujamaa Centre offers resources which would assist the group to structure itself and/or to formulate more carefully their project. Wherever possible, the Ujamaa Centre also encourages groups to draw in related groups in the community and/or church who would share similar concerns. This often means, for example, that 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.

Once the organized group has ownership of the project, the Ujamaa Centre then joins with them in a workshop. Usually the workshop is based on a theme or issue that is of vital concern to the group; so, for example, the group may want to deal with the question of violence against women, or leadership, or unemployment. Because the Bible is a resource for groups with which we work, Bible study is always one of the activities of a workshop – though there may be other activities as well – and is the activity that the Ujamaa Centre is specifically invited to facilitate.

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[2] I insert a footnote here for emphasis. Because I reflect and write about these things, as part of my contribution to the work of the Ujamaa Centre, it is often, but mistakenly, assumed that the Ujamaa Centre interface is one of white biblical scholars reading with black poor and marginalised Bible 'readers'. While this is sometimes the case – and even when it is I and others like me are never alone – the vast majority of Ujamaa Centre encounters involve black organic intellectuals reading with sectors communities to which they belong and to which they have been invited.

What follows is one example of a Bible study the Ujamaa Centre has facilitated on a number of occasions. Different communities have invited us to work with them on Bible studies that highlight the way in which structures and systems may become corrupt. For example, we have been invited to facilitate Bible study on matters of national and international concern such as economic globalization by church leaders in South Africa. At a national level we have also been invited to lead Bible study on public morality, as our country struggles with corruption in many spheres of public life. We have also been invited, more locally, to do Bible studies that address the experience of ordinary Christians that the church often oppresses them through the demands it makes on their giving. This Bible study addresses such issues.

An act of faith

Contextual Bible study of the kind that is deeply and profoundly an act of faith. The Bible study is immersed and saturated with spontaneous prayer and singing; nothing happens among African Christians without spontaneous prayer and singing! Not only is every Bible study begun 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.

The people who make up our Bible study groups varies. As indicate 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 their context, but we do not refuse the invitation from our church leaders. In our South African context, a call by the church leaders means that we are doing Bible study primarily with men; a call by a local group of believers usually means that we are doing Bible study largely with women.

Because we in the Ujamaa Centre believe that ordinary people have as much to contribute to the Bible study process as those of us with biblical studies training, our Bible studies are constructed around questions (not input by or answers from experts). I will discuss the rationale behind the kinds of questions we use later. Here I want you to imagine you are participating in a contextual Bible study.

The facilitator

The Bible study is driven by questions, and so the role of the facilitator is to enable participants to engage with the questions (and in so doing to engage with each other and the text of Scripture). The primary role of the facilitator is to enable 'group process' to take place, ie. to manage group dynamics, to promote turn taking, to keep time, to summarize and systematize the reading results, to find creative and empowering ways of reporting back to plenary the findings of the group, and to move the group from reflection into action. Besides the more general group process concerns, the facilitator's task in the contextual Bible study process is to stimulate the use of local reading resources and to introduce critical reading resources from biblical studies into the reading process as they are requested and required.

The Bible study

Question 1: Read Mark 12:41-44. 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 and the participants are invited to 'buzz' with their neighbour concerning what they think the text is about. After about 5 minutes the facilitator calls for responses to Question 1. Each and every response is then summarised by a scribe (from among the participants) 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 their say, 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.

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?

For the rest of the questions the participants will work together in small groups of no more than five in a group. There are various ways to divide the plenary into groups (see next chapter). When the participants know who is in their small group, Question 2 is written on the newsprint.

In their small groups, Question 2 is discussed, but not before each group appoints its own facilitator and scribe. The task of the facilitator in each group is to enable discussion (see above) and the task of the scribe 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 scribe reporting on behalf of the group (after which, time permitting, other members can add to the report). Each group's responses are summarized 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 the 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, even though there is a chapter division.

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 relish. 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.

During the plenary reportback, each group puts up its newsprint and reports on its discussion. The general facilitator then tries to summarise the responses in a communal picture of the characters and relationships in Mark 11:27-13:2. The discussion which accompanies the drawing is usually wide-ranging and full of insight into the text. Some participants will draw on socio-historical resources in their reports and others will ask for this kind of information from the general facilitator. So, for example, participants might ask who the Herodians were, or how the temple functioned in the time of Jesus. When asked, the facilitator, or any participant, is encouraged to provide the information requested.

What emerges from Question 4 is a reading of the text which can be summarized as follows:

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 realize 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 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. 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 criticizes 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 our 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 characterizes 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. Similarly, 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, recognizing, perhaps, 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 to the sections we have already read.

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 oppressors - 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 sustain it "will be thrown down" (13:2); God will not tolerate such an abomination.

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.

The offering of and request for socio-historical information enhances our picture. For example, a socio-historical understanding of the temple recognizes that the temple ordered the religious, social, political, and economic life of Israel. The temple was not a religious institution only. First, the temple ordered each person's status 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. 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 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 what we can call the Jesus movement, focused 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". Jesus, as our reading has already suggested, had similar reasons for acting prophetically against the temple. Socio-historical resources such as these make the position of Jesus even clearer.

By now the participants' 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 their contexts.

Question 5: How does this text speak to our respective contexts?
Question 6: 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 6 some South African groups have argued that our government's new economic policy actually results in increased 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 who are living with HIV/AIDS) when they should be protecting and providing for them.

When it comes to their action plans, groups are 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/AIDS. Other groups have planned more politically 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 I have described is a ‘real’ Bible study, not an academic exercise. My description hardly captures the energy and excitement of ordinary African Christians engaging deeply with the Scriptures.

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

Hermeneutical and Pedagogical principles

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 (eg. questions 1, 6, and 7).
- **Textual or critical consciousness questions** – which draw on the structured and systematic resources of biblical studies (eg. questions 2-5).

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** can be 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 **organizing and acting**.

Bible Study 2
2 Kings 5:1-19a

Introduction

This Bible study was first used when the Ujamaa Centre was invited by a women's group to facilitate a Bible study on the theme of 'Women, Water and Healing'. We have since used it many times to address other themes.

The Bible study

Plenary

1. Read 2 Kings 5:1-19a in your own translation and then listen to it being read in English. What is the text about?

Plenary reportback

Groups

2. Who are the main characters in the story and what do we know about each of them?
3. Retell this story now by drawing a picture or doing a drama.

Plenary reportback

Groups

4. What is the untold story of the the young slave girl who is the key agent in this story? Try and be creative in your 'telling'; eg. write a letter from the young slave girl to her family, compose a poem, perform a drama, sing a song, find a flower, etc.

Plenary reportback

Groups

5. What untold stories in your context does your "telling" bring to your memory? Tell their stories to the group.
6. What will you do in response to this Bible study?

Newsprint reportback

Summary of the reading process in a typical Bible study

In response to the first question (a contextual question) there were a wide range of responses that picked up on many important aspects of the text. This process opened up a number of themes that could be pursued.

The second question (a textual question) returned participants to the text in order to identify and describe the main characters. Namaan, Elisha, the little girl, the servants of Namaan were identified as major characters, and the two kings, the God of Israel, the foreign god were indentified as minor characters.

The third question enables the participants to re-present the text either through a drawing or a drama. In either case, the role of the little slave girl is central. The participants clearly show her centrality to the plot; she is the primary agent of the action. Without her there would be no story!

And yet she herself is without a story! The text implies her story but does not tell it; it is present by its absence! So the text itself seems to invite our attempts to hear her story. This can be done in a variety of creative ways. Here the Bible reader brings his/her experience to bear on the text, filling a ‘gap’ in the text, and providing a voice for minor characters whose stories are only partially told. Excluded by the dominant patriarchal tradition, our readings recover this implied story.

Hermeneutical and Pedagogical principles

Two forms of **textual/critical consciousness** were used:

- **Literary modes** of reading, specifically questions concerning characterization and plot.
- An **in front of the text** approach was used to allow the reader to engage in an active way with the text. The focus of this approach is on the possible worlds projected by the text, whether they were intended by the author or not. Texts always have multiple meanings. This mode of reading allows readers to bring their experiences, needs, and questions to the text and to interact with one or more of the possible trajectories or themes of the text.

In these two Bible studies we have introduced the full range of resources Biblical Studies has to offer to the ordinary reader:

- **Historical-critical resources ('behind the text')**. Modern biblical criticism begins with a shift away from an ahistorical approach to an emphasis on questions of origin: sources, authorship, *autographa*, historical reconstruction. From these historical interests developed the various historical-critical approaches: textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism and redaction criticism. The central concern of all these critical approaches is the relationship between the text and the author or source. The impact of reader response criticism (see below) contributed to the recognition of the importance of sociological resources, and so sociological criticism has recently become an important component of reading 'behind the text'. Sociological criticism focuses on the way in which society is structured, and includes analysis of class, race, gender, etc.

- **Literary resources ('on the text')** A shift then occurred with the advent and subsequent influence of structuralism which was reflected in a move from an interest in the origins of a text to an interest in the text itself. The text itself became the focus. The predominant interest of this shift was the synchronic analysis of the text on its own terms without recourse to external factors. In other words, there was a move away from explanation in terms of origins, and explanation in terms of extratextual reality. From these interests in the text itself developed structuralist, literary, and canonical approaches.

- **Reader/reception resources ('in front of the text')** A more recent development in biblical studies is an interest in the relationship between the text and the reader. The reader is no longer seen as merely a passive acceptor of the text but as an active, even creative, contributor in the interpretive process. Reader-response criticism, autobiographical criticism, and the way the Bible is read in contextual theologies are examples of a focus on the reader. The recognition that readers are located in a context led to the realization that authors too are located in a 'thick' context which includes sociological as well as historical dimensions (see above).

Bible Study 3
Genesis 37-50

Introduction

This Bible study demonstrates the importance of local resources for reading the Bible (see woodcut), and also uses creative resources to do a Bible study on a large section of biblical text. We have used this Bible study to address a number of contextual themes, including African culture, the family, political power, leadership (see below), etc.

The Bible study

Plenary

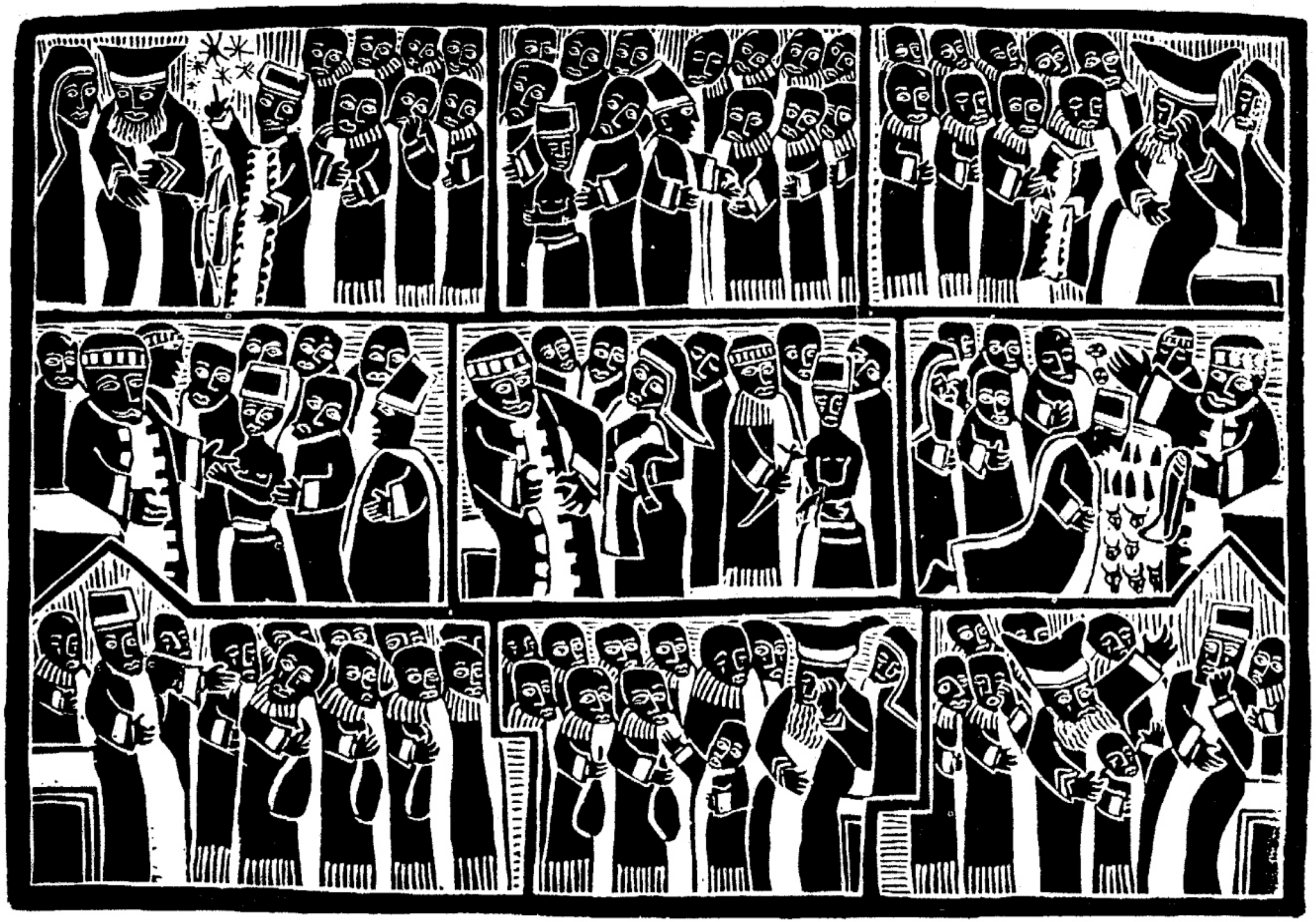
1. What is your first impression of the woodcut of the Joseph Story by Azariah Mbatha (a South African artist)?

Plenary reportback

Groups

2. Can you identify each of the scenes in the Joseph story as it is retold by Mbatha? Try and locate each scene in the Bible and give chapter and verse references for each panel of the woodcut.
3. What is the focus of each panel in the woodcut? In other words, what are the major themes and concerns of Mbatha's retelling of the Joseph story?
4. In what ways does Mbatha's interpretation of the Joseph story support or differ from your own reading or memory of the Joseph story?
5. What resources does Mbatha use to retell the Joseph story?
6. Do similar resources exist in your own context? Give examples.
7. How does this retelling of the Joseph story speak to your context, and what will you do in response to this interpretation.

Plenary reportback



Hermeneutical and Pedagogical principles

This study demonstrates that local **non-academic resources** can be used for reading the Bible. A local African resource provides the way into the biblical text. Significantly, question 2 does exactly the same work as a textual question usually does! By trying to 'read' Mbatha's woodcut, participants are forced to return to the text again and again.

The **non-textual perspective** of Mbatha opens up new ways of seeing, and enables the rediscovery of neglected aspects of the text. For many Christians (who went to Sunday School) the Joseph Story is about an individual. Mbatha's woodcut reminds us that the story is a story about a family and a community. Every panel is full of people.

Mbatha's reading offers **postcolonial** perspectives for reading the Bible in that it adopts a western form (top to bottom and left to right 'reading'), which it then subverts by working in pictures rather than words. Mbatha's woodcut is an African commentary on the Bible!

Experience with **non-literate** people indicates that they do not 'read' the woodcut in a top to bottom and left to right way; this may suggest that it is possible to read the woodcut in other ways.

Mbatha's woodcut offers a creative and critical way of **reading a long text** (Genesis 37-50) which would otherwise prove very difficult to read with ordinary readers. The woodcut draws us back to the biblical (textual) account as we soon discover how little we remember the Joseph story. So the woodcut is a resource for a more careful and close reading of the text.

This Bible study has generated many insights, some of which have been recorded in the books *Contextual Bible Study* and *The Academy of the Poor*.

Bible Study 4

2 Samuel 21:1-14

Introduction

This Bible study introduces us to the reality that there are often contending theologies within the biblical text.

The Bible study

Plenary

1. Read the literary unit 2 Samuel 21:1-14 together. What is the text about?

Plenary reportback

Groups

2. Who are the main characters and what do we know of them?
3. What is the theology of each of the main characters? Using the text as a basis, try and reconstruct elements of each characters' theology.
4. What is the theology of the narrator? A careful reading of the text gives us some clues to the narrator's point of view.
5. Which character and theology do you identify with and why?
6. How does this text speak into your lives; what will you do in response?

Plenary reportback

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

Not everybody read with Rizpah, and so our reading is a marginal reading which is located among other contending readings. Most readers initially read with David, a godly character whom they know and trust from their readings of other texts. And this story seemed to confirm their confidence in David; his response to the famine is to "seek the face of God" (1a). But then some readers pointed out that the famine was already in its third year (1a). Why had it taken David so long to "seek the face of God"? Did this suggest that David was not as close to God as he should have been? Unease with David grew when he did not immediately choose the first of the options offered by the Gibeonites: restitution through "silver or gold" (4a). How could he agree to restitution through blood? Did this mean that David was not as close to his people as he should have been? Or did it indicate, as some argued, that David was being particularly sensitive to the power dynamics implicit in the situation; namely, that because the Gibeonites were a marginalized community their initial response was one of deference (4a). Being aware of relations of power, David gave them the space to articulate their real request by making it clear to them that he was giving them the right to decide: "What do you say that I should do for you? (4b).

Perhaps, some said, David was even using this opportunity to rid himself of potential opposition from Saul"s house. David might have been using the Gibeonites, pushing them to execute his own political interests. This line of reasoning appeared to be supported, some readers argued, by the repeated presence of Saul and his "house" in the story. Participants pointed to the reference to Saul's "house of blood" (1b), the Gibeonites' reminder that Saul was "the chosen of God" (6a), and also drew on what they knew about the tensions between David and Saul from other texts. This would explain, they suggested, why David did not take up the opportunity provided by the first response of the Gibeonites to offer financial compensation (4a). Some went further and argued that David's refusal to take this option and the repetition of the question allowed or even prompted the Gibeonites to make the decision they did. They understood the illocutionary force – the unspoken intent – of David's repeated question: David wanted Saul's family to be eliminated as a potential threat to his throne. Realizing this, the Gibeonites obliged, either for reasons of their own or because they had little option given their position. In their initial request the option of "silver or gold" is grammatically linked to "Saul and his family" and the option of "putting to death" to "anyone in Israel" (4a), but when David asks the second time, the object of the killing is clear, though Saul is not mentioned by name (5-6a).

None of the readers much liked the idea of David using the Gibeonites for his own ends; in fact, those reading with David became more and more uncomfortable with the David of this story. But those reading with the Gibeonites, and this was often the majority, applauded David for doing the appropriate thing. Some form of restitution was clearly implied by God's statement (1b and 2b), and rather than imposing his form of restitution, David asked the Gibeonites for theirs. And when they behaved deferentially, David rightly recognized this as the behavior of a vulnerable and marginalized group, and so persisted until they felt free to state their preference. David was being remarkably sensitive to the power dynamics in that situation.

These readers went further, arguing that the perspective of the Gibeonites was appropriate and right. Many of these black South African readers were adamant that the Gibeonites were right to demand blood restitution; they too knew what it was to be systematically slaughtered. Blood restitution was an appropriate response to a "house of blood" (1b) that "consumed" and "planned to destroy" (5), particularly when the house in question was the house of the dominant who had used their power to oppress and decimate the vulnerable and marginalized.

This reading led to a heated discussion of capital punishment, which was at that time being debated by the new Constitutional Court in South Africa. Those reading with the Gibeonites insisted that the death penalty must remain and must be reactivated (there being a moratorium at that time), so that those guilty of blood could be appropriately punished. So those reading with the Gibeonites, and those reading with David, sharing as they did a similar theology, felt that David was right when he gave seven relations of Saul into the hands of the Gibeonites (9a) and that the Gibeonites were justified in "exposing/impaling them" (9a). Further, they showed that their readings were substantiated by the final sentence of the story: "And God answered prayer for the land after that" (14b). The phrase "after that," the concluding phrase in Hebrew, clearly referred to the handing over and exposing/hanging/impaling of the family of Saul.

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

Reading from a largely African culture, most readers were very uncomfortable with the "hanging/exposing" (9) of the bodies. Even those who were deeply committed to the perspective of the Gibeonites found this practice difficult to understand. Relatives of the dead must be allowed to bury the dead properly. Disrespect towards the dead was wrong. And so cracks in the dominant reading began to appear.

Those who read with David found fresh resources for their reading. While Saul had broken the oath of Israel to the Amorites (2b), David had kept his oath to Jonathan by sparing Mephibosheth (7). This showed that David did honor his relationships, even with those who had a claim to the throne. Moreover, David did honor the dead by bringing the bones of Saul and Jonathan, and the bones of their relatives that had been hung/exposed/impaled, and gave them a proper burial (12-14a). In this respect, then, David did have a different theology to that of the Gibeonites. So, some suggested, the phrase "after that" probably included not only right restitution but also right burial.

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

Among those who read with Rizpah were those who emphasized her silent solidarity with the dead. She was doing what women all over the world do, caring for the dead. And because she was in a marginalized position, being a woman and a concubine (11), to care for and bury the dead, including her children, properly, she stayed in solidarity with them, doing what she could to honor them. Others who read with Rizpah emphasized the "deafening silence" of her protest. Although silent, by publicly associating herself with the victims of the king's policy, she was engaging in a political act of protest. She was caring for the dead while and because men with power do not care for the living. This was one of those rare moments when the hidden transcript of women's resistance to dominant ideologies and theologies ruptured the public transcript of deference and disguise; what was usually acted and spoken offstage by women, behind the backs of the dominant, now found a public form at center-stage.

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

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

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

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

And so this text remains contested. Perhaps that is the narrators primary point, that there are contending theologies and theologies of life and death coexist in our communities. The Bible, like the church, is a site of struggle. But those of us who came to know Rizpah cannot forget her. She is our sister and we are her people. We have been partially constituted by her story; by sharing in her story we have also been strengthened in our struggle for survival, liberation, and life.

Hermeneutical and Pedagogical principles

This text is a very good example of a **neglected part of our tradition**. Fortunately, however, this fragment has been preserved, even if the various redactors of the story of the David could find no proper place for it. The text itself portrays the theological struggles that existed at a particular time. By reading texts like this we allow the neglected traditions in our Christian tradition to speak. The Bible does not speak with one voice; we must therefore be alert to the silences, absences, and partial presences.

Recovering and studying neglected aspects of the biblical tradition will open up additional **lines of connection** between the struggles of our people and the similar struggles of those who have gone before us in the tradition. This is both encouraging and empowering for those who often wonder whether they belong in the church.

Bible Study 5
2 Samuel 13:1-22

Introduction
This Bible study engages with a text that most people do not even know is in the Bible. This text has become the basic resource for the Tamar Campaign.

The Bible study
Plenary
1. Read 2 Samuel 13:1-22 aloud to the group as a whole. A group can be asked beforehand to prepare a drama that reenacts the story; or the participants can be asked what the text is about.

Plenary reportback

Groups
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 do?

Plenary reportback
When the small groups have finished their discussion, and this takes considerable time, each group is invited to present a summary of their discussion. This is done in a variety of ways; if there is time, each group is asked to report on each question, but if time is a constraint then each group is asked to report on only one question. The full report, which the scribe of the group puts up on newsprint, is then displayed for everyone to read at some other time. The report backs can also be presented more creatively, by way of drama, poetry or song.

Groups
After this report back the smaller groups reconvene and discuss the following questions.
5. Are there women like Tamar in your church and/or community? Tell their story.
6. What is the theology of women who have been raped?
7. What resources are there in your area for survivors of rape?

Plenary reportback
Once again, the small groups present their report back to the plenary group. Creativity is particularly vital here, as often women find it difficult or are unable to articulate their responses. A drama or a drawing may be the only way in which some groups can report.

Groups
Finally, each small group comes together to formulate an action plan.

8. What will you now do in response to this Bible study?
The action plan is either reported to the plenary or presented on newsprint for other participants to study after the Bible study.

TAMAR SAID NO!

2 Samuel 13:12 and 16

Summary of the reading process in a typical Bible study

In our experience the effects of this Bible study are substantial. Women are amazed that such a text exists, are angry that they have never heard it read or preached, are relieved to discover that they are not alone, are empowered because the silence has been broken and their stories have been told. As one women said, "If such a text exists in the Bible, how can we be silent about these things in the church?" How indeed.

The initial, opening question generates a host of responses as 'readers' share their early impressions of this seldom read text. Ordinary 'readers,' whether literate or not, readily engage with questions 2, 3 and 4, returning to the text again and again to find out as much as they can about each of the characters, missing nothing. They note the way in which Jonadab, a relative of Amnon's, attempts to draw himself nearer to the potential heir to the throne of David by identifying his restrained lust. Reminding Amnon that he is indeed "son of the king" (13:4) and thereby implying that he should have whatever he wants, Jonadab provides a plan for the rape of Tamar. The slow pace of the story, with the graphic description of the plan and then its execution, are also picked by ordinary 'readers' as they delve into 13:5-11. David, it seems to them, is somewhat irresponsible, unable to detect that Amnon's request is a ruse (13:6), and so he sends Tamar to be raped (13:7). (Some readers remember the earlier stories in 2 Samuel and comment on how often damage is done when David "sends.") Whatever restraint Amnon may have had now collapses as he premeditates the rape of his sister (13:9-14). Women 'readers,' in particular, applaud the clear and careful way in which Tamar responds. She trusts her brother and willingly serves him while he is sick; and even when she finds herself trapped, she argues articulately with him. First, she says a clear "No" (13:12), which should be enough. Second, she reminds him that he is her "brother" (13:12). Third, she makes it clear that she is not a willing participant and so names what he is doing, "forcing" her (13:12). Fourth, she reminds him of their cultural heritage and communal values, "for such a thing is not done in Israel" (13:12). Fifth, she declares his intentions to be vile and evil (13:12). Sixth, she appeals to what she hopes is some recognition of her situation, reminding him of the consequences of his actions for her (13:13). Seventh, she then turns the question on him, asking what the consequences of such an act on him will be (13:13). Eighth, she offers him a way out, at considerable cost to herself, suggesting that he speak to the king about marrying her (13:13). Alas, even this most articulate of all biblical women is not listened to, "and being stronger than she, he forced her and raped her" (13:14).

And even after the rape she does not remain silent, arguing with Amnon again, this time urging him not to abandon her to the consequences of rape on her own (13:16). But the male ego again refuses to hear, and she is forcefully (again) removed (13:16-17).

Tamar's public acknowledgment of the rape (13:19) is met with mixed reactions by women 'readers' as they both applaud her decision 'to go public' and worry at the cost of such a public statement in a patriarchal society. They find some comfort in Absalom's offer of sanctuary, but reject his silencing of her (13:20). Finally, they are appalled by David's empty anger, and his impulse to protect his son (13:21).

Clearly, each of the male characters, whether it be David, Amnon, Jonadab, the servants, or Absalom, plays a role in the rape of Tamar, though their roles are different. This is how many men it takes to rape a woman!

The point of view of the narrator is interesting, with most 'readers' commenting that this 'male character' (presuming the narrator to be a male) is surprisingly sympathetic to the concerns of women. They are grateful that he names rape for what it is: a violent assault on a woman (13:14). They are amazed by how articulate Tamar is and find many of her arguments convincing. They especially like the fact that she finds aspects of her cultural and religious heritage potentially liberating, even if they are often used to oppress and dominate. Most of all they are astounded that such a text exists in the Bible, for they find it a remarkable resource with which to raise and discuss rape in their own contexts.

Questions 5, 6, and 7 provide plenty of opportunity for precisely such discussions, with many women finding 'sacred space' to share the unshareable. They quickly discover that they are not alone, and soon the 'Davids,' 'Amnons,' 'Jonadabs,' 'servants,' and 'Absaloms' in their own experiences are named. Clearly professional counseling is required in many such situations, and it is irresponsible to proceed without it.

Question 8 provides an opportunity 'to do something about it,' and groups come up with wonderfully creative actions plans, whether to compose a liturgy for their local church or to challenge the local police station to provide resources for the survivors of rape.

Implicit in the Bible study as outlined above are all the elements of the contextual Bible study process. The Bible study begins and ends with what can be called 'community consciousness' questions. Questions 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8 draw on the readings and resources of the local community group. By using small groups and writing up all responses the contributions of all participants are affirmed. Habitually, responses to question 1 elicit the public transcript; participants offer interpretations they have received and which they feel are safe to proclaim publicly. They know what they are expected to believe about the Bible. However, there are usually some responses which are more ambiguous and which potentially provide space for more authentic interpretations – interpretations that articulate something of their experiental/ 'working' theologies. If the group becomes a safe place, if there are resources to articulate what is often incipient and inchoate, and if there are resonances with others in the group, then gradually elements of 'working', 'lived' faith may be more overtly and vigorously voiced and owned.

Clustered in between the community consciousness questions are a series of what might be called 'critical consciousness' questions. These questions are the contribution of the socially engaged biblical scholar, and provide resources for repeated returns to the text and more careful and close 'reading.' In this example, the critical consciousness questions draw on literary modes of interpretation, posing questions about characters, plot, setting, etc. Such structured and systematic questions are not usually in the repertoire of ordinary 'readers', though once asked, the questions are readily grasped and appropriated. The advantage of using questions which draw on literary modes of interpretation is that they do not require any input from the socially engaged biblical scholar ('the expert'). The questions are contribution enough, and ordinary 'readers' make of them what they will. However, in many instances ordinary 'readers' want access to resources that are only available to the 'trained' reader. So, for example, participants may want to know the significance of Tamar tearing her clothing. In such cases, the socially engaged biblical scholar may offer socio-historical resources in response to this question, choosing to do this, preferably and where possible, by drawing on parallels in the participants' own socio-historical context.

In our experience literary-type questions almost always lead into socio-historical-type questions; this is important, because it indicates the need ordinary 'readers' have to locate faith in real concrete contexts. But by beginning with literary-type questions and by allowing socio-historical-type questions to emerge from the participants, the powerful presence of the biblical scholar is held in check. Equally importantly, by waiting for the questions to arise from the participants, we can be sure that we are answering questions of interest to them rather than questions of interest to us biblical scholars (on which the industry of biblical scholarship is based).

Critical consciousness questions facilitate a more careful and close reading of the text than is usually the case among ordinary 'readers'. They give the text a voice, and in so doing open up potential lines of connection with faith trajectories in the biblical tradition that have been neglected or suppressed. Women discover, to return to our example, that they are not alone, that their terror can be found in the Bible, and while this "text of terror" (Trible 1984) perhaps offers little comfort, it does at least acknowledge the reality of their experience.

The concluding community consciousness questions (5, 6, 7, and 8) ground the Bible study firmly in the life of the participants. In responding to these questions, community consciousness and critical consciousness fuse and fashion faith interpretations (Patte 1995) that make sense and which are an expression of the 'lived', 'working' theologies of ordinary believers. Whether or how these incipient and inchoate faith interpretations are articulated depends on how safe the contextual Bible study process is. In safe places women who have been touched by Tamar tell their stories, help and hold the pain of their sisters, and plan for the transformation of their churches and communities. Unfortunately, not all Bible study groups are safe, and so some women may remain silent, waiting still. But the potential is there, implicit within the contextual Bible study process and this text for the articulation, owning, and acting out of those interpretations and theologies that ordinary 'readers' of the Bible live by.

Hermeneutical and Pedagogical principles

This text, like the one above, is hardly ever read publically in church. Most participants, therefore, are unaware that such a text exists. And this is part of its power. By reading and studying a text like this we find **new lines of connection** between our lived faith and the biblical tradition. Women who have been abused often find, for the first time, a story that connects with their experience of abuse.

If the Bible study group is a safe place, and some thought needs to go into the composition of the small groups when doing a Bible study like this, then women may begin to articulate aspects of their lived/working theologies that they have never given expression to before. This can be a very traumatic experience, and so it is important to make sure that there are **counselling resources** available.

This Bible study recovers the voice of one of the most articulate women in the Bible. It is worth reflecting carefully on the verbal responses of Tamar as she confronts her half-brother, Amnon. She counters many of the **myths associated with rape**. She is raped because Amnon is stronger than she is – rape is about power, not intellectual and moral power, but physical power. Tamar is remarkably clear and coherent in her in arguments against Amnon, but he will not hear.

An exercise

Given that Tamar was probably between 12-14 years old when she was raped, adapt this Bible study so that it can be used with children. Clearly care needs to be taken in doing this and those attempting this task should consult with those who have been trained in work with children.

Another exercise

How would you adapt this Bible study, or design another Bible study, to explore with male participants the problem of rape?

Bible Study 6
Mark 5:21-6:1

Introduction
This Bible study deals with the important issues of culture and gender; we have provided a detailed commentary on the process, question by question.

The Bible study (and commentary)
Plenary
1. Read Mark 5:21-6:1 and discuss in small groups what this text is about.

Responses to this question probably include some of the following: healing, compassion, faith, love, hope, despair, and many others. Readers could probably extend this list. Some groups may include 'women' as a theme of this text, as did one of the groups of ordinary 'readers' with whom this exercise was done.

Once there has been reportback from each group, and all the responses documented on newsprint, the participants return to their groups for the next two questions of the Bible study.

Groups
2. Who are the main characters, and what do we know about them?

This question returns the "readers" to the text as they try to glean as much as they can about the various characters. What begins to emerge is that this text seems to be about women. This suggestion is supported by a careful reading of the text. First, the story of the two women is a literary unit, delimited by the geographic shifts in verses 21 and 6:1. Second, although the central character appears initially to be a man, Jairus, the central characters in the story are in fact two women. Jairus does initiate the action, but is then ignored as first the woman with the flow of blood and then Jairus' daughter move to centre-stage. The actual absence of the first woman mentioned, Jairus' daughter, emphasizes her narrative presence. The plot depends on her presence. Similarly, the woman with the flow of blood, the second woman, is foregrounded even though she seeks to be self-effacing. And while Jesus is still speaking to the second woman, the first woman is again represented by others (verse 35). It is almost as if the narrator himself (herself?) is interrupted - the narrative certainly is - by the unnamed woman with the flow of blood. (This woman is named Berenice by some in Latin America.) The careful narrative introduction of Jairus, a named male with power (verse 22) is first interrupted, and then deconstructed, by the unnamed woman with no power.

Third, that the plot and sub-plot are carefully connected is stressed by the repetition of "daughter" , in verse 34 with reference to the second woman and in verse 35 with reference to the first woman. The ambiguity of "your daughter", referring to Jairus and possibly to Jesus, in verse 35 reinforces this connection. The women, and so their stories, are also linked by repetition of "twelve years" (verse 25 and 42). It has also been suggested by some readers that "twelve years" may, in the case of the young woman, be an allusion to the onset of menstruation and so the beginning of fertility. The flow of blood for the younger woman meant life was possible, but the flow of blood for the older woman meant that life was no longer possible. The young woman of twelve years of age is a narrative reminder of the child(ren) that the older woman has not been able to bear. Here is another link between the two stories. There is also a parallel structure to each episode. In each case the woman is defined by her social location; in each case the woman is in need; in each case Jesus responds to her need; in each case the woman is unclean; in each case there is contact, touching, between Jesus and the woman; in each case Jesus speaks to the woman; in each case there is healing and restoration of the woman to the community.

While Jesus is always seen as a major character who is on the side of the women, the emerging presence of the women as central characters did sometimes cast him in another light. Some women wondered whether Jesus was not conscientized by the faith of the woman who touched him. Would Jesus have been as radical as he was without this woman? For most women, however, the Jesus of the story is the Jesus who they know and experience as being with them in their daily struggle for survival, liberation, and life, and so their focus in the reading is firmly on the women. While the text may be about the things they initially mentioned, they now know it is about women – about them.

At this point in the Bible study the facilitator of the group suggests that it is appropriate to move on to the next question.

3. What do the two main women characters have in common?

Once again, this question returns participants to the text as they attempt to understand the message. Extensive discussion and digging into the text with a whole range of experiences and resources yield some fruit and some frustration. A partial picture begins to emerge of two women bound by social systems – similar to their own – from which they are liberated by Jesus. Adding to the textual and socio-historical resources of the ordinary "readers" the socially engaged biblical scholar in the group facilitates further exchange. The partial picture already constructed begins to take on a clearer shape as the responses of the ordinary "readers" are supported by some input on the sociological setting of these women.

Both women are initially identified in terms of patriarchal social systems, and not in their own right. They are not named, they are described in terms of their location within two interlocking social systems. The first woman is defined by the patriarchal system of first century Palestine. She is defined in terms of her relationship to a male, her father. The second woman is defined by the purity system of first century Palestine. She is defined in terms of her uncleaness, her flow of blood. Both women, in other words, are situated in social systems that determine how the world in which they live relates to them.

4. How does Jesus respond to these women?

But Jesus responds differently. Having heard the story of the second woman, he embraces her uncleaness by affirming her faith and healing. Her twelve years of uncleaness and social alienation are ended when she is healed and restored to the community. The acceptance and affirmation of Jesus, together with her faith, bring freedom from her religious, economic (verse 26), sexual, and social suffering. The nameless, self-effacing woman has become a part of the Jesus movement, has become 'daughter'. Jesus has literally empowered her! (verse 30). There will still be times when this woman will not be able to worship in the temple, when she will not be able to be touched, when she will be unclean, when she will be marginalized by the patriarchal purity system. But that system has been challenged and changed by her story.

Similarly with the first woman. Not only does Jesus touch her unclean dead body (verse 41), he also refers to her in her own right rather than as the property of her father. Her father and 'some men' (used by certain English translations) refer to her in the patriarchal genitive (verses 23 and 35). Jesus relates to the young woman as a subject, not as an object (verse 39 and 41). Significantly, the narrator adopts Jesus' subject designation in verse 40 in his implicit refusal to describe the young woman as the property of her father, in contrast to the patriarchal positioning language of Jairus and his men. Instead of defining the young woman as possessed by her father, as an object (see verse 23 where Jairus refers to her as 'My little daughter'), the narrator now designates her as a subject, possessing her father and mother (verse 40). There will still be times when this young woman is defined in terms of her social location within a patriarchal household, when she will be described with the possessive case, when she will be treated as an object by the patriarchal system. But that system has been challenged and changed by her story.

After reporting back to a plenary gathering of the participants, people return to their groups for the final series of questions.

5. What are the similarities and differences between these two women and women in your communities?
6. What does Jesus and this text say to women (and men) in your community?
7. What will your group do in response to this Bible study?

Of course, each community will answer these questions differently. However, what generally occurs is that groups begin to do a social analysis of their context in an attempt to identify structures that oppress and marginalise women in their communities. In India, for example, caste is identified as a structure that impacts directly on women.

Question 6 usually leads to a discussion of how women hear Jesus standing in solidarity with them against oppressive structures. Jesus affirms their identity and agency. In some groups, lists are drawn up of the different ways in which this text speaks to men and women!

Finally, groups plan actions that are possible within the constraints of their context. Some groups are able to plan actions that emerge into the public realm, but some are more tentative planning more ‘disguised’ or ‘hidden’ actions, often among women themselves.

Bible Study 7
Mark 3:1-8

Introduction

This Bible study has emerged from Bible studies that people who are living with HIV and Aids have developed. This is the kind of text they choose to reflect on.

The Bible study

Plenary

1. Read Mark 3:1-8 together. What do you think the text is about?

Groups

2. What is the Pharisees' image of God?
3. What is the Pharisees' view of synagogue tradition?
4. What is Jesus's image of God?
5. What is Jesus's view of synagogue tradition?

Reportback to plenary, then back to Groups

6. What image of God does the disabled man have?
7. What view of synagogue tradition does the disabled man have?

Reportback to plenary, then back to Groups

8. What image of God do people living with HIV/Aids have?
9. What view of church tradition do people living with HIV/Aids have?
10. How should the church respond to people living with HIV/Aids?
11. What will you now do to assist your church to work more 'positively' with people living with HIV/Aids?

Plenary or poster reportback

Hermeneutical and Pedagogical principles

This Bible study is an attempt to 'read the **signs of the times**'. Our current context demands that we respond in a Godly way to people living with HIV/Aids. Our churches and their theological traditions are struggling to respond in a life-affirming way. Most people who are living with HIV and Aids feel alienated from their families and churches, particularly those who have become open about their status. Those who have not declared their status are reluctant to do so because they fear the stigma and discrimination of church and society.

This Bible study builds on the **actual experience** of Bible study groups facilitated by an Ujamaa Centre staff member, Ms Bongi Zengele. She facilitates Bible studies with groups who have been tested and who are open about their status. These group members choose to work with texts in which Jesus stands overtly over against the prevailing views of society. Clearly their experience is that society, whether it be their families, their church or society generally, rails against them. This is why the group is so important; for a moment they are with people that stand with them, not against them. That Jesus regularly appears to take a stand with those who are discriminated against by their families, their religious institutions, and society generally, has been recognised and embraced by the members. Zengele emphasised to me that the group members do not deny their reality, nor do they deny their responsibility for contracting the virus (given that most of the group members are young people who have probably contracted the virus through sexual intercourse of one kind or another). What they will not accept is the denigration of the dignity – being treated as less than human. The loss of immunity does not mean loss of humanity! Their deep desire is for an alternative theological perspective that grants them dignity, given that the predominant theology they encounter from the church is extremely damaging to people like them. This kind of Bible study provides resources for forging a new and more 'positive' theology.

Bible Study 8
Job 3

Introduction

This Bible study was developed to address the context of HIV/AIDS, particularly the kind of theology that is prominent in the churches. The predominant view in most Christian communities is that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God. That HIV is transmitted mainly by sexual intercourse (in our context) only confirms this opinion.

The Bible study

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

2. Read Job 3 together at least twice. What is Job's trying to say in this text? What images or metaphors does Job use in his lament?

3. What does this text say to people living with HIV and AIDS? Which of Job's images or metaphors are particularly relevant?

4. What would be your own version of Job 3? Share it with those in your group.

5. How can you share your version of Job 3 with your local church or community?

Summary of the reading process in a typical Bible study
We took this Bible study to a local Pietermaritzburg Siyaphila group (an HIV/AIDS support group) on the 11th March 2004. Bongi Zengele, who runs our Solidarity with People Living with HIV and AIDS Programme, invited me to co-facilitate a Bible study with this Siyaphila group. Before we read the text, we introduced the Bible study to Ntombenhle Ngcobo, Thembi Ndawo, Nonhlanhla Zuma, Mduduzi Mshengu, Hlengiwe Zulu, Nelly Nene, S'fiso Zuma, Fikile Ngcobo, Jabu Molefe, Xolani Khumalo, S'bongile Shezi and Phindile Ndlovu (The group agreed that they would like to be acknowledged for their contributions, but decided that we should not identify who said what.)

We asked the group if they knew of the book of Job, and many said they did. We then asked if they had heard Job read in church and funerals, and most said that they knew Job 1:21: "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." We followed this up by briefly sketching the literary context of this text, before asking Zengele to read Job chapter 3. Fortunately, as we had been a little late to arrive, the group had already had the opportunity to read the text for themselves.

After we had read Job 3, we asked the group to say what they thought about this text. The first response came from a young man who asked me what could have happened to Job to make him curse the day of his birth. We were impressed that he had grasped the thrust of the poetry so easily and were tempted not to answer him directly, but merely to acknowledge his response and then wait for others to share their thoughts. But we quickly saw that the others were waiting for our response. This had been a genuine, not a rhetorical, question. We responded by going over chapters one and two in more detail, cataloguing the calamities that had come upon Job's homestead. He nodded at this, but did not say anything more at this point.

The next person to respond was a young woman who drew our attention to verse 18, commenting that she and those who had been diagnosed as HIV-positive felt just like prisoners. This was followed by another member of the group asking, with great yearning, why things like this happened/happen. Our response was: "This is precisely Job's question!" At this point the young man who had set the discussion in motion reentered, saying that the heading to this section in the Zulu Bible, "Job curses the day of his birth," was most apt. This is exactly how he felt on the day he was diagnosed. He literally cursed the day he had been born.

Another member, someone who had not yet spoken, joined the discussion by saying that she thought this text showed that the more faith you had the more you would be tested. Our first impulse was to question this, and we did, by wondering aloud whether Job himself would have agreed with her. However, even as we said this it struck us that she was perhaps making a positive comment about herself, namely, that because of her great faith she was now being greatly tested.

The discussion then turned again to Job's cursing his birth, but this time it was followed up by a number of members agreeing that they too had seriously considered taking their own lives. Again they asked us quite directly what advice we had for them concerning this. Given their situation, what about the option of them taking their lives? As one person said, "We are like Job; we are good people who were not looking for this thing, and yet now we are infected." So close was their identification with Job and his deep depression. At this moment we realised the dangers of the Bible study and began to wonder if this was not just another misguided attempt to offer resources by a non-infected people. Bongi was reassuring, however, so we moved on, saying that we did not think that Job was contemplating taking his own life. For him, we suggested, it was God who was responsible for his life, and until God took it, he was not going to keep silent and accept the dominant theology of his day. He was going to take his considerable anger directly to God and call God to account.

We then quickly voiced our fear by asking the group directly whether this text was of any help to them or was it just a reminder of their desperation. The response was unanimous, but varied. They found the text immensely empowering. So we asked them in what ways they found it empowering. One of the group linked her experience directly to our comments, saying that she found the text comforting, because like Job, the day she received her HIV results she wondered why God had not taken her life earlier, when as a child she had almost drowned. Others said chapter 3 affirmed the enormous anger they had and that it was theologically permissible to express this anger. Bongi Zengele confirmed this, reminding the group of all they had been through together, specifically of how important it had been for them to learn that it was 'okay' to own all their feelings, even if this required cursing God in prayer. The group agreed, with someone adding that this kind of emotional freedom also contributed to them dealing with other matters unrelated to HIV and AIDS. By expressing their anger, Zengele continued, they had begun to find healing, for both their psyches and their bodies.

The terrible thing, they agreed, was that the church silenced their anger. And so we were challenged directly, with one of the members asking whether we would be willing to lead this kind of Bible study with a wider grouping, including their families and churches. Others assented, making it clear that they felt that this kind of Bible study on this kind of text would make a huge difference to prevailing views. They acknowledged that many people they knew simply had no opportunity to share about these things.

A young man who had said very little in the discussion thus far interrupted this flow by asking us, "What about those who do deserve it?" By now we were used to this kind of direct request. Again, we drew them back to the text by saying that we thought that Job was having to thoroughly rethink the very notion that people 'deserved' suffering. We went on, and here we were drawing on Elsa Tamez's "A letter to Job", saying that Job's suffering had taken him out of his comfortable life-style and had shown him the suffering of others.

A young woman then brought the discussion back to where we had started, narrating how she had begun the process of killing herself, using alcohol, until she had realised that she still had responsibilities to her dependants. She understood this realisation as God calling her back to life, even though she had cursed God. This echoed what had been said earlier, that they were amazed to discover from Job that even though they cursed God, God still welcomed them. We had mentioned in our introductory comments that despite Job's unrelenting outbursts against his friends, the theology they represented and God, God had affirmed that Job "had spoken of me what is right" (Job 42:7). We reread this final God speech and wondered aloud whether, by engaging so fully with God, Job had come see God more fully.

These comments of ours, and the explicit comparison of Job and his friends in these verses, prompted a number of the group to talk about their experiences of being judged by their families and friends and churches. One young woman said people in her church had judged her, unjustly, once they knew she was HIV-positive. This text, she said, was a "homecoming." A young man then shared how he had been talked about in his community when he had begun to lose weight. This had been very hard, he said, to be the object of other people's judgmental attitudes. However, he had learned to cope with this, he said, through the resources of the Siyaphila group, including this Bible study. What he had learned from the group and this Bible study was that even people close to God face difficulties. Finally, another young man, the same one who had asked about those who might "deserve it," commented on how he and other activists were judged when they did awareness work in their communities. People asked them, assuming they were HIV-positive, "Now where is your God?" He now knew how to respond, he shared with us, by saying, "Job shows that God stays with him."

At this point there was a pause in the discussion. The group seemed satisfied with what had been said. Bongi Zengele allowed the quiet to persist, nodding encouragingly at each member, affirming their openness and their contributions. She then brought this part of our Bible study to an end by saying that though their bodies were HIV-positive, they were more than their bodies. They were spiritual beings as well. Siyaphila, she went on to say, deliberately worked for an integration of the spiritual and the bodily, believing that both needed attention and that both could take the other with along with it. Today, she said, we have uplifted our souls and so our bodies.

We then suggested that we conclude our Bible study, as is our practice in the Ujamaa Centre, by being quite practical. Given that they had stated that their experiences were not allowed any space in the church, what about them writing their own versions of Job 3? We would then collate them and make them available to churches who would use them in their liturgies. They like this idea and set to work. We concluded our time together with each person reading or talking to their version of Job 3. Again, there was considerable diversity, and here is not the place to reproduce their contributions in full. We need to return their 'laments' to them and make sure that they are happy to have them made public. We are in the process of collating, typing and translating them.

Their versions of Job 3 ranged from commitments to return to their families, having fled their rejection but having found resources which now enabled a return, to sustained interrogations of God, asking repeatedly “Why?” to prayers asking for help to accept the virus, to requests for enough life to support her sons, to probing questions about God’s reputation as a healer and as a God who intervenes.

We have promised to return to Job 3 when next we meet for Bible study, which is every alternative time they meet. By the end of this Bible study we were exhausted, and Bongi Zenele made us all take deep breaths. There was an amazing sense of relief in the group to have spoken what had been spoken, and yet it had also been traumatic to relive those first moments of being informed that you are HIV-positive. Job chapter 3 had taken us back to this moment, but also beyond it. This ‘positive’ reading of Job 3 now occupies that vast space between diagnosis and death, providing resources to live ‘positively.’

Bible Study 9

Introduction

This Bible study has no biblical text. In fact, it is a Bible study that is in search of a biblical text! Using the art of local artist Trevor Makhoba, this Bible study attempts to probe what biblical texts we use when we speak theologically about HIV and AIDS.

The Bible study

1. In small groups, try to interpret Trevor Makhoba's linocut. What does the linocut say to you?

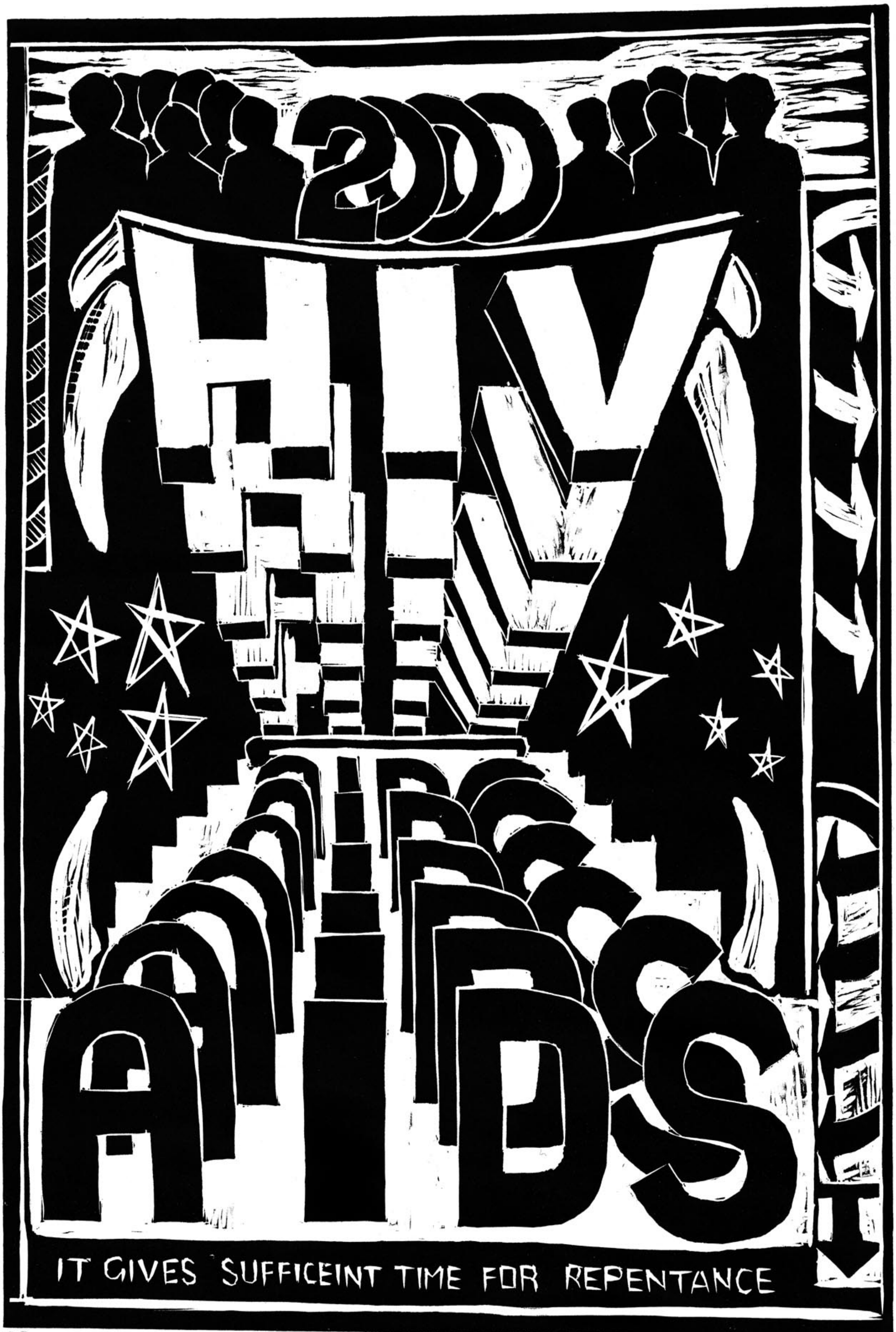
2. Which biblical texts do you think Makhoba is drawing on in this linocut?

3. What is Makhoba's theology of HIV and AIDS?

4. What is your theology of HIV and AIDS?

5. What biblical texts do you draw on to speak theologically about HIV and AIDS?

6. How can we make an impact on the church's theology about HIV and AIDS?


2000
HIV
AIDS
IT GIVES SUFFICEINT TIME FOR REPENTANCE

AP

GOD WANTS HIS PEOPLE

Makhoba 2000

Personal reflection on Makhoba's linocut

Here are some of my own reflections on this linocut.

The predominant view in most Christian communities is that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God. That HIV is transmitted mainly by sexual intercourse (in our South African context) only confirms this opinion in the minds of many, including (perhaps) Makhoba. That HIV/AIDS is a punishment from or the discipline of God/the is corroborated, some argue, by aspects of African Religion. Whatever the mix of African and Christian origins, there is no doubt that this is the dominant theology that people living with HIV/AIDS encounter in our South African society, both in and outside the church. They bear in their bodies, they are led to believe, God's punishment for their 'sins,' particularly their sexual 'sins.' Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane admits to the prevalence of this theology in the Christian church when he recently said, "Christianity has too often espoused a destructive theology that links sex and sin and guilt and punishment" (*The Witness* July 30, 2004: 3).

What we know of Makhoba's Christian and cultural commitments would predispose him to some form of theology of retribution, and this particular work of Makhoba's seems to support this view. The mouth of some great beast is waiting (or perhaps advancing) to devour those who do not repent with its twin gapping jaws: HIV (the upper jaw) and AIDS (the lower jaw). Tombstone and coffin-like teeth are posed to crush. Yet Makhoba's theology provides some hope: there is time, he proclaims, for repentance. The jaws have not yet closed, they remain open. "IT GIVES SUFFICEINT TIME". The "IT" he refers to is unclear, but probably refers to this beast, whose millennial nostrils provide an overt date. The darkness, he seems to be saying, of the new millennium and its heraldic disease are almost upon us, but there is still time to repent.

Here Makhoba aligns himself with a long line of biblical prophets who read 'the signs of the times' and speak accordingly to the people of God. "GOD WANTS HIS PEOPLE' Makhoba proclaims, along with Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, John the Baptist and the many others Makhoba has encountered in his well-used Bible. The implication of this prophetic call is that God's people have gone astray, that they must repent and return to God, and that if they do not God will punish them.

While his predominant role is that of prophet, there are indications that at times he stands with the bewildered people, lamenting, waiting in hope to receive the prophetic oracle. Such, I think, is the case with respect to the linocut.

However, before I come to this, it must be emphasised that Makhoba locates himself, primarily, as social commentator and religious prophet. The linocut fits the prophetic pattern well. The horror of the punishment that awaits those who refuse God's call is vividly portrayed. But the prophet's voice/text is equally clear: God wants his people, and there is therefore sufficient time to repent. This work of Makhoba's also fits the disciplinary parameters of the deuteronomistic theology of retribution (which pervades the books of Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel and Kings): the people of God have forsaken their God, so God has therefore given them over to the consequences of their sinfulness, but when they cry out to God and/or the ancestors (as Makhoba's pictures do), God hears, raises up a prophetic leader, and restores the people.

But is this all we can read in Makhoba's work? I think not. Makhoba's theology is more complex, I will argue, and this is clearest in the work under discussion. HIV/AIDS demands a more complex theology.

Fortunately, there are biblical theological trajectories that interrupt the dominant theology of retribution, and there are signs of these in this work of Makhoba's. The clearest clue to the presence of other theological voices is the identity of Makhoba's beast. It seems that this beast most closely resembles the hippopotamus, though it may also exhibit some of the features of the crocodile.

These beasts, the crocodile and the hippopotamus, share significant features. They are both beasts that lurk beneath the surface of life, seemingly still and disinterested in human activity, and yet they can be roused with ferocious force and devastating effects. While the real beasts reside in rural communities, they are present in other forms in urban township life, or so Makhoba seems to be saying.

Makhoba's beast is, I think, also found in the Bible, in the book of Job. For it is in this book that we encounter Behemoth, sometimes translated as 'hippopotamus', as it is in the both the old and new Zulu translations (*imvubu*) (Job 40:15-24) and Leviathan, sometimes translated as 'crocodile', as it is in the new Zulu translation (*ingwenya*) (Job 41:1-34). In these two concluding chapters of the book of Job we come to two strange and wonderful beasts, beasts over which human beings clearly have no control (which is God's point in these chapters), but beasts over which even God does not have complete control (which is perhaps the poet's point in these chapters) (Perdue 1991). Might part of Makhoba's theology be found here, with Behemoth (the hippopotamus) and Leviathan (the crocodile) in the book of Job? "Look at Behemoth", says God, "It is the first of the great acts of God – only its Maker can approach it with the sword" (Job 40:15 and 19, NRSV). As for Leviathan, says God,

> were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?
> No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
> Who can stand before it?
> Who can confront it and be safe?
> – under the whole heaven, who? (Job 41:9b-11)

The book of Job is an excellent example of an intense debate about the theology of retribution. In the prose prologue we enter a world in which the theology of retribution is taken seriously. Job, we are told, was not only himself "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1), but he would also "send and sanctify" his sons and daughters after they had feasted, rising "early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts" (1:5). Job's health and wealth, and the health and wealth of his sons and daughters, it is implied, is directly related to Job's righteous life. The theology of retribution holds.

The story then becomes complicated, particularly for the reader, who is privy to the heavenly debate between God and his colleague, the Satan (1:6-12). Job, however, is unaware of the heavenly wager (though its victim), and so is forced to live in a world which, from his perspective, no longer conforms to the principle of retribution. Job has lived righteously – all agree – but is punished rather than rewarded. At first Job doggedly accepts his fate, refusing to question God's control. So much so that he can say, having experienced the loss of his livestock and servants, the destruction of his property and the death of all of his children, and his own deteriorating health – after all this, he can say, "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). Even the theologically astute call of his wife to put an end to his suffering by questioning God's so-called, alleged, order – "Do you still persist in your integrity [ie. your theology]? Curse God, and die" (2:9) – is met with an affirmation of God's control from her husband: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (2:10)

Job, it would appear, accepts "the bad" from God, remaining silent, refusing to "sin with his lips" (2:10) by questioning God or this theology. As he silently sits his friends come among him, to "console and comfort him" (2:11). And we know what they will say; they will each explain to him how he must have sinned, in some sense, for how else can he (or, more importantly, they) explain his suffering. By looking at the destroyed and diseased Job they can tell that God must be punishing him in some way for something he has done – this is how their theology works.

But before they can say anything, and to their credit they do not immediately 'counsel' Job, Job speaks. At last he takes his wife's advice! Perhaps the death and destruction around him and within him had numbed him; one hopes so. Now, however, the radical challenge of his wife has registered in his numbed mind; the marvellous ambiguity of the Masoretic text's "Bless/curse God, and die" have their theological effect. If being righteous and blessing God brings about such havoc, then what damage can cursing God do? Having earlier refused to "sin with his lips" he now lets rip! Perhaps reluctant to follow his wife's theological proposition the whole way, Job curses God indirectly rather than directly, cursing "the day of his birth" (3:1). Prose is no longer adequate for what Job is about to say, and so the text shifts into poetry. This shift is more than a shift from prose to poetry however, it is also a shift in theology!

Here is the beginnings of another theology; here is a cry of rage and pain; here is an incipient and inchoate theology. Here is an attempt to undo what God did in Genesis 1! God says, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3); Job counters with, "Let the day be darkness!" (for further discussion see Clines 1989: 67-105; and Gutierrez 1991:7-10). Here Job struggles with how to speak of God – how to do theology – in the context of immense suffering and loss.

And so does Makhoba; he too struggles, I would suggest, with how to speak of God in the context of HIV and AIDS. His beast, like Behemoth and Leviathan, poses the profound theological question of whether God is fully in control.

I have cited Job chapter 3 at because it seems to me that some of its images are to be found in this work of Makhoba's. While his beast, I think, derives from or resonates with Behemoth and Leviathan in Job chapters 40-41, the darkened human forms and the night's sky behind the beast's gapping mouth and crushing teeth, I suggest, derive from or resonate with Job chapter 3. Like Job, I hear Makhoba in this work lamenting the day of his birth and calling for the day to become night. As prophet, Makhoba stands outside the picture, proclaiming the words of the frame to others. As fellow-sufferer, Makhoba stands inside the picture, with the darkened figures, with the devouring beast in the darkness of the night.

In this linocut Makhoba grapples theologically with the presence of HIV and AIDS in his community. The beast is before us, but precisely what does God want from or for his people? "GOD WANTS HIS PEOPLE" to do or be what? The incompleteness and ambiguity of these words portrays Makhoba's theological torment, and yet he does find hope in the Bible, both in the book of Job, as we have seen, though the message is a mixed one, and, I think in two other texts. Rather boldly, Makhoba amends and adapts, I think, the biblical text of 1 Peter 4:1-3 and 2 Corinthians 12:9 respectively.

For here we read in 1 Peter 4:1-3, though I am not sure what translation Makhoba alludes to, the following:

> Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For the time already past is sufficient *for you* to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries (NASB).

If Makhoba is alluding to this text in his words within the linocut, "IT GIVES SUFFICEINT TIME FOR REPENTANCE", then he alters their import, granting still more time than the author of 1 Peter for repentance to those viewing. Here Makhoba extends God's grace into the future, appropriating the other text referred to above: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NASB). Makhoba boldly declares God's grace beyond the limits set by the Bible.

But what if “IT” is not God but HIV and AIDS? Will “IT” pay heed to Makhoba’s declaration? Makhoba, like Job, yearns for God to be in control, but what if he is not (fully)? So the tension remains, but so does Makhoba’s hope.

In this work more than any other of his that I have seen, Makhoba inhabits the creative, honest and tensive space between subject and object. His care for his culture, faith and community and his prophetic calling make him the subject, identifying the signs of the times, warning his people of coming calamity, and offering words of hope. His human integrity and his awareness of his own ‘sinfulness’ place him as the object, lamenting as he wonders and waits for a word of comfort and hope, and perhaps, a more relevant theology. Is the HIV/AIDS beast God’s punisher, like the accuser (the satan) in the book of Job (2:1-7), or is the HIV/AIDS beast more like Behemoth and Leviathan, creatures that even God himself struggles to control? The answers are not easy, as Job found, but he and Makhoba are commended by God (Job 42:7) for asking the hard questions in face of conventional theology and even of God.

Bible Studies 10 and 11
Two Bible studies on land

Introduction
The next two Bible studies are part of a series of four Bible studies in the process of being developed by the Ujamaa Centre with a working group of the Church Land Programme, an NGO dealing with land owned by churches in the context of land redistribution in South Africa.

Bible study 1: Land possession and dispossession
1 Kings 21:1-16

We suggested that it would be a good idea if a group of young people would prepare a drama based on this story. The drama would serve to break the ice and to generate local interpretations of this story.

After the drama, the following framework is suggested:

1. What is the text about?
This question should be discussed by the group as a whole, with the responses of each person being recorded on newsprint. This question requires about 20 minutes.

After this, participants should be divided into small groups. These small groups should then discuss the following questions:

2. Who are the characters and what do we know about them?
3. Why does Ahab want Naboth's vineyard?
4. Why does Naboth want to keep his vineyard?
5. What strategies are used to take Naboth's vineyard from him?
6. What role do race and class and ethnicity play in this story?

The small groups should then each report (to save time, they should take turns in reporting on particular questions). The final question in this series, Question 6, may require some input from the facilitator shuld the groups request it. So the facilitator needs to be prepared to say something about the structures of early Israelite society. The groups would need at least 30 minutes to do these questions and another 20 minutes to report.

After the reports the participants should return to their small groups to answer the following questions. While the above questions draw attention to the text, these next questions draw on the experiences and realities of the community. The facilitator will need to be creative and flexible here because different questions may need to be asked in different contexts. The following questions presuppose a community that has lost its land.

7. Why and how have people in your community lost their land?
8. Why is this land your land?
9. What strategies are there to regain your land?
10. What will be your plan of action?

If the community is already on land they consider to be theirs but where their tenure is being threatened, the following questions would be more appropriate:

7. Why is this land your land?
8. What strategies are being used to take away your land?
9. What resources are there for you to retain your land?
10. What will be your plan of action?

Again, at the end of group discussion there should be reportback to the plenary. Each small group should write up their plan of action and present it to the larger group. For these questions to be done properly and for there to be adequate time for reportback and the sharing of action plans, at least 60 minutes should be allocated.

Bible study 2: Women and land
Numbers 27:1-11

Again, it would be good to have a group, preferably a group of women, begin the process by doing a drama on this text.

The format would be the same as the above; indeed, this Bible study makes a nice companion Bible study to the one above.

1. What is the text about?

2. Who are the characters and what do we know about them?
3. What reasons do the daughters of Zelophehad give to inherit land?
4. What structures prevented women from owning land?
5. What role does Moses as leader and the law play in this story?

6. What does this story say about women's agency?
7. Do women in your community own land?
8. What reasons do women in your community give to own/inherit land?
9. What do traditional authorities in your area say about women owning land?
10. What does the church say about women owning land?
11. What does the constitution/law say about women owning land?
12. What will be your plan of action?

Again, there needs to be creativity and flexibility in formulating questions, particularly in the final series of questions which are strongly context based.

Both these Bible studies are constructed from the perspective of the poor, the working class, and the marginalised.

Articulating, owning and mainstreaming local theologies: a concluding reflection on the potential of contextual Bible study

Introduction

One of the symptoms of our failure as church to articulate and mainstream the local theologies that have been forged in our various struggles over the past two decades has been a dislocation within individuals – particularly activists – between their 'default' public theology and their community-based practice.

The public theology of the church tends to be about – and I am following Walter Brueggeman's analysis here – consolidation and structure legitimation. The church's public theology "tends to be a movement of consolidation which is situated among the established and secure and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who faithfully abides and sustains on behalf of the present ordering" (Brueggemann 1993:202). This kind of theology is what the *Kairos Document* characterised as "Church Theology", a theology that was inherently passive then it came to the socio-political realm (theologians 1986). The dark side of this theology, according to Charles Villa-Vicencio (Villa-Vicencio 1989:16), is that it is the breeding ground of right wing religion.

In constant dialogue with this conserving theological tradition is another, a theology that "tends to be a movement of protest which is situated among the disinherited and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who decisively intrudes, even against seemingly impenetrable institutions and orderings" (Brueggemann 1993:202). This "Prophetic Theology", in the language of the *Kairos Document*, while present in the church, is not the public theology of the church and probably never will be. However, the challenge that remains is to find ways of enabling the prophetic theologies formed in particular struggles to shape the public theology of the church.

Praxis: action and reflection

My opening comments seem to place the blame for the activists' dislocation on the church. While the church does need to accept responsibility for failing to provide its Christian activists with appropriate theology for their tasks, activists and their organisations too must take some blame. Those of us involved in activist organisations have become reasonably good at action, but have tended to neglect the theologically reflective moment of the praxis cycle. In other words, our work is driven by social analysis, but not social analysis and the gospel!

Praxis has two moments: a moment of action and a moment of reflection, following each other in a forward cyclical process. The failure of activist organisations is the failure to allow sufficient time, space and resources for the reflective moment. The result has been 'burned out' and theologically bankrupt activists whose default theology remains the status quo theology of their churches, which is usually an evangelical-like theology of structure legitimation. Scratch an activist, even one who has now gone into the government sector, and this what we tend to find a version of "Church Theology". Perhaps, a black colleague has suggested on reading an earlier draft of this, the newly emerging black middle-class actually wants "Church Theology", for it dulls their activist memory and legitimises the new status quo.

But while I am handing out blame, the theologian and biblical scholar should not be neglected. As Albert Nolan has so clearly argued (Nolan 1996), ordinary workers (and we could include here also the unemployed and rural women) do not have the time, space or resources to do theology within the constraints of their lives. They need socially engaged theologians and biblical scholars to come alongside them and to do theology with them, by serving them with their time and resources. So biblical scholars and theologians who do not make themselves available in this way must share the blame for our current theologically bankrupt context.

Local, embodied theology

Having said this, I do not want to give the impression that ordinary Christians and activists do not do theology. They do! However, the theology that they do is an embodied theology and not usually an articulated theology (Cochrane 1999). But they do have a 'working theology' that they live by. The problem is that this 'embodied theology'[3] is not usually associated with the public theology of the church. So the problem is not the absence of relevant local theology, but the dislocation between these local prophetic, pain embracing (to use Brueggemann's phrase) theologies and the dominant (and dominating) public theologies of the church.

The question then remains of, first, how we enable an articulation and ownership of embodied theologies, and, second, how be bring these local theologies into the public realm – what I have called mainstreaming, a term I have borrowed from pedagogy, and which refers to the need to integrate elements into the curriculum which are often tagged on to it as afterthoughts.

Contextual Bible study

One way of doing this, formulated in many contexts around the world, though in diverse forms, has been through community-based Bible study. This is not the place for a history and categorisation of this family of practices, suffice it to say that the following form a part of it: the Centro de Estudos Bíblicos (CEBI) in Brasil, with whom socially engaged scholars like Carlos Mesters (Mesters 1984; Mesters 1989) worked and which included the "Four Sides" approach of Gilberto Gorgulho; the See-Judge-Act method of the Young Christian Workers and the Institute for Contextual Theology (among others) (Stevens 1985; Dumortier 1983; Speckman and Kaufmann 2001:4; Cochrane 2001:77); the Ilimo Community Project Bible studies (Philpott 1993); and the Contextual Bible study method of the Institute for the Study of the Bible and Worker Ministry Project (now Ujamaa Centre) (West 1995, 2003).

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[3] While sharing some of these ideas with theological students in Chennai, India, they preferred the phrase 'embodied theology' for what I had up to that point called 'lived' or 'working theology'. I have taken up their term.

What all these approaches have in common is the construction of a safe and secure site in which what is disguised or hidden (Scott 1990) may be articulated and owned, the sharing of local and academic resources for accessing and articulating embodied theologies, and an animating/facilitating process that allows for the articulation and owning of local, embodied theologies (for a fuller discussion see West 2003). The precise mechanism that facilitates this articulation and owning and an understanding of the constraints of this being mainstreamed is part of an ongoing debate (West 2003; Haddad 2000; Nadar 2003).

Some case studies

The following case studies will demonstrate aspects of what I have been arguing.

Case study 1: Violence against women

Given the reality of violence against women in our context, the Ujamaa Centre has since 1996 used a contextual Bible study on the story of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22) as a resource for the articulation, owning and mainstreaming of the embodied theologies that are constructed out of contexts of abuse (West and Zondi-Mabizela 2004; West et al. 2004; West 2004). Through a careful reading of Tamar's story (using the following questions: Who are the main characters, and what do we know about them?; What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?; and What does Tamar say and do?) participants draw on the resources of biblical scholarship (ie. literary resources) and in so doing engage more closely with the text than is their usual practice. Having done this, and having shared their readings with one another, participants then bring their corporate readings into dialogue with their reality – their experience (using the following questions: Are there women like Tamar in your church and/or community? Tell their story.; What is the theology of women who have been raped/abused?; What resources are there in your church and/or community for survivors of rape?).

The dialogue between text and context enables participants to find and forge lines of connection between their embodied theologies and the Bible. Because the Bible is a sacred text and because Christians locate themselves in relation to it, establishing such lines of connection can be enormously empowering, particularly when the resources of biblical scholarship enable unfamiliar texts (such as 2 Samuel 13) to be read, and familiar texts to read in unfamiliar ways (see Case study 3 below). In this case, women who have been raped discover that they are not alone. Not only do their stories connect with Tamar's story, they also discover that other women in the Bible study group have similar stories. And so embodied theologies are given voice and become owned.

But the Bible study does not end here. There remains one final question: What will you now do in response to this Bible study? While groups plan various kinds of creative actions, including tackling social structures, in many instances groups plan actions that will take the products of their Bible study into the church, whether through a drama or a song or a liturgy or through the setting up of church-based counselling or similar resources. Here we have, then, attempts at mainstreaming the embodied theologies that have been articulated and owned.

Case study 2: HIV and AIDS

Well intentioned, affected, but non-infected people imagine that infected people would want to do Bible study on texts about leprosy. They are wrong. Through Ujamaa's work with the Siyaphila network of groups – an organised network of support groups of people living with HIV and AIDS – we have been taught that the texts they choose are texts in which Jesus takes an overt stand with the victims of social and religious discrimination and stigma and against the social and religious status quo (West 2003). In a situation where the predominant message they hear proclaimed from the churches concerning people like them is bad news, their hope is that this is not all there is to the Christian message. Indeed, their own personal and corporate experience and lived theology affirm otherwise; they know that God is with them. So they dare to believe that what they hear from the churches is not the full gospel and turn in hope and trust to the Bible to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

The texts they choose are those texts where the good news for them is clearest; texts in which Jesus takes a clear stand against prevailing social perspectives and dominant theologies in favour of those who have been pushed to the margins by these perspectives and theologies. In declaring another perspective and another theology, the texts they choose articulate their incipient sense of God's presence with them. Remarkably, despite the almost constant assault from the church, these young women and men remain resolute in their belief that God is with them. Their embodied theology, though inchoate and incipient, is that God is on their side.

And yet, as a Bible study on the stilling of the storm in Mark 4:35-41 articulated, though they know that God and Jesus stand with them against the dominant discriminating theology of the church, they also experience a Jesus who is in some senses asleep. "It is time for Jesus to wake up", they said! Here is the beginnings of a profound theology of both God's presence and absence in the context of HIV and AIDS! Would that the church had ears to hear.

In another Bible study with a Siyaphila group we explored together a fuller reading of Job than their churches have allowed them. Confronted weekend after weekend, at funeral after funeral with the compliant words of Job: "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21), we interpreted together those parts of Job denied them by their churches. Together we read Job chapter 3 (West and Zengele 2004).

Job, we all know, accepts "the bad" from God, remaining silent, refusing to "sin with his lips" (2:10) by questioning God or the dominant theology. As he silently sits, his friends come among him, to “console and comfort him” (2:11). And we know what they will say; they will each explain to him how he must have sinned, in some sense, for how else can he (or, more importantly, they) explain his suffering. By looking at the destroyed and diseased Job they can tell that God must be punishing him in some way for something he has done – this is how their theology works (as does the prevailing theology of HIV and AIDS – and the Tsunami).

But before they can say anything, and to their credit they do not immediately ‘counsel’ Job, Job speaks. At last he takes his wife’s advice! Perhaps the death and destruction around him and within him had numbed him; one hopes so. Now, however, the radical challenge of his wife has registered in his numbed mind; the marvellous ambiguity of the Masoretic text’s “Bless/curse God, and die” have their theological effect. If being righteous and blessing God brings about such havoc, then what damage can cursing God do? Having earlier refused to “sin with his lips” he now lets rip! Perhaps reluctant to follow his wife’s theological proposition the whole way, Job curses God indirectly rather than directly, cursing “the day of his birth” (3:1). Prose is no longer adequate for what Job is about to say, and so the text shifts into poetry. This shift is more than a shift from prose to poetry however, it is also a shift in theology!

Here is the beginnings of another theology; here is a cry of rage and pain; here is an incipient and inchoate theology. Here is an attempt to undo what God did in Genesis 1! God says, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3); Job counters with, “Let the day be darkness!” (for further discussion see Clines 1989: 67-105; and Gutierrez 1991:7-10). Here Job struggles with how to speak of God – how to do theology – in the context of immense suffering and loss. Would that we read this text at the countless funerals of our people who have died from AIDS-related illnesses. Would that Job 3:3-26 would be read rather than Job 1:21: “the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Reading Job 3 together in the Siyaphila contextual Bible study generated a frighteningly embodied theology of anger, pain, rejection, desolation and despair. So much so that I feared that I had made a grave mistake in taking this text to the group. But after some hours the very act of articulating this embodied theology brought healing and hope (West and Zengele 2004). We concluded the Bible study with each person writing their own version of Job 3. We have collected these laments and intend to offer them to the churches so that their liturgies and life may be enriched.

Case study 3: Land and food security

This final case study is an example of a Bible study in process, and emerges from work I am doing with the Church Land Programme. A team of community-based activists and I are constructing a series of Bible studies on land issues in our country. One of the issues we have been asked to address is that of land and food security.

As we brained-stormed about possible texts for such a Bible study, one of the participants in the planning group suggested that the Lord's Prayer was a good example. Puzzled at first, we all nodded in affirmation when he quoted the familiar "Give us today our daily bread". Clearly, he said, this was about food security.

I must confess that at this point in the planning I became rather distracted. I had never thought of this text in this way, but having been prompted by this person's observation – based as it was on his very real experience of the need for bread each day – I began to reassess my previous understandings of this text and my many careful exegetical studies of it. I had been taught by the Ilimo Community Project in Amawoti, an informal settlement near Durban, that this sentence was about actual bread for an actual day, and not some metaphorical (middle-class) 'bread'. But I had not followed this thought to its logical conclusion. What, I began to ask myself (while talk went on around me), if this sentence was the beginning of a series of petitions on food security?

The first petition has to do, as one of our planning group had recognised, with food security for each day: "Our bread for this day, give us today" (Matthew 6:11). Here is a community that Jesus' knows does not have food security, and yet he knows that God's good news for these people is that they should have food for each day. The next clause, I reflected, could then be read as a development of this idea. "And release us from our debts", read in the context of food security then explores the reasons for a lack of food security. The reason, Jesus indicates, is that their indebtedness has led to the loss of their land – a common problem in the time of Jesus. Peasant farmers under the monarchy and later the temple-state system often became victims of the debt cycle (see Gottwald 1979, 1985; Pixley 1991). To have food security, Jesus implies (via the prayer he teaches) not only means food for each day, but also access to land. However, if the community of God's kingdom (to use Matthew's phrase) is to be a just one then not only must those who follow him be released from their debts (and so reacquire their land), they too must release others from indebtedness, hence the next clause in the prayer: "as even we have released our debtors". The use of the aorist here signals a completed action, indicating an act that has been completed by the community making the prayer. Having released their compatriots from their debts, they too cry out to God to be released from their indebtedness. Taking the initiative and releasing those who owe them a debt is no easy thing, and so Jesus urges them to pray, "And do not bring us into temptation", for the temptation is not to release the debts of others but to benefit from them. However, and here the prayer of Jesus comes to its conclusion, the final petition is that God should "rescue or deliver the vulnerable from evil (or the evil one)" (13). The final deliverance, to ensure food security, must be a deliverance from the evil of systems like structural indebtedness.

All this was beginning to buzz around in my head as we prepared the Bible study on food security. After we had discussed some other texts I shared the above preliminary thoughts with the group, who became very excited about the possible connections between the various petitions and food security. And so the seeds for a Bible study on the so-called Lord's Prayer have been planted. How we turn this into a Bible study remains a task for our next meeting.

What this case study illustrates rather nicely is the sharing of resources and the collaborative project that contextual Bible study is. Biblical scholarship here serves the insights and experience of community-based activists, providing additional resources for the articulation and owning of embodied theologies.

The potential in this case for mainstreaming is massive, for by praying this prayer with this understanding in our churches we participate performatively in proclaiming and preparing the way for a more just socio-economic system.

Conclusion

Under the dried crust of the often bereft public theology we carry resides a deeper, usually unarticulated and incipient, theology. This embodied theology has been generated by our lived faith and experiences, but it is inchoate and unformed. A challenge that awaits the church is to tap into this rich residual substratum of theology and to bring it into the public realm. Only then will the church be the kind of safe and sacred space where women, people living with HIV and AIDS, those marginalised and abused by society, and the poor are fully at home.

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