



Locating 'Contextual Bible Study' within biblical liberation hermeneutics and intercultural biblical hermeneutics

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This article uses the occasion of the 70th anniversary of *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* to reflect on a particular form of liberation hermeneutics that emerged in the 1980s in South Africa. 'Contextual Bible Study' is briefly defined, but its precise contours are explored by locating this form of liberation hermeneutics within liberation hermeneutics more generally and then intercultural biblical hermeneutics more specifically. The article sets up a dialogue amongst these practices, examining both their family resemblances and their distinctive features.

Introduction

Ordinary readers of the Bible have always hovered on the edges of academic biblical studies, but within biblical liberation hermeneutics, they have found a more central and integral place. This article charts the emergence of a particular form of their presence, offering a historical and hermeneutical account of what has come to be called 'Contextual Bible Study'. Rather than focus on Contextual Bible Study in isolation, however, this article locates this 'method' or inclusive reading process within biblical liberation hermeneutics more generally.

Contextual Bible Study is a South African contribution to the trajectory of biblical liberation hermeneutics and so offers a fitting focus for the 70th anniversary of *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*. Amongst the many contributions of South African scholarship over the past 70 years, Contextual Bible Study has rendered its own distinctive brand. Over the past 30 years, the South African context has been shaped quite markedly by the *Kairos Document* (Kairos 1985). Whilst its 20th anniversary passed with hardly any notice (West 2006b), the 25th anniversary in 2010 struck a chord across the fragments of the prophetic movement in South Africa and further afield. Part of the response to this anniversary has been a reappraisal of the South African *Kairos Document* and the range of 'kairos' documents inspired by it, including 'kairos' documents from Central America (1988), from a coalition of countries including the Philippines, South Korea, Namibia, South Africa, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala (1989), from Kenya (1991), from Europe (1998), from Zimbabwe (1998), from India (2000), from the United States of America (2007) and most recently from Palestine (2009; see all of these documents in Leonard 2011).

What we have returned to in our reflections on the South African *Kairos Document* are three of its key contributions. Firstly, the *Kairos Document* emerged 'from below' as the masses involved in the South African struggle for liberation 'articulated' in word and deed their 'theological' understandings of our context in the early 1980s. Secondly, the *Kairos Document* was produced through an extended communal, collaborative and dialogical process, which brought together the poor and oppressed, organic intellectuals and socially engaged theologians.¹ Thirdly, the *Kairos Document* provided new theological categories forged from our context and with which to analyse our context, distinguishing between 'State Theology', 'Church Theology' and 'Prophetic Theology'.

Cutting across each of these three key contributions is a connection and articulation between 'people's theology' and 'prophetic theology' (Kairos 1986:34–35, n. 15; Leonard 2011:63, n. 15). People's theology includes the embodied and variously expressed forms of the theology of organised marginalised communities. Prophetic theology includes the more systematic forms that theology constructed on the base of people's theology, 'renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity' (to use the formulation of Antonio Gramsci 1971:330–331, Q11 §12). Liberation hermeneutics in general and Contextual Bible Study as a specific form locates itself with this nexus, serving the dialogical movement from people's theology to prophetic theology.

Common to the South African *Kairos Document* and the 'kairos' documents that emerged from Latin American contexts during the same period, *Kairós Centroamericano* and the collaborative

1. It is important to note that these are not distinct but in many instances overlapping categories, in that many of those involved in the process embodied more than one of these 'identities'.

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Road to Damascus Document entailed a similar 'See-Judge-Act' structure, both in the process which produced these documents and in their format. Another similarity was the recognition of common contextual features across our realities, including imperialism, colonialism and low-intensity total war (Institute for Contextual Theology [ICT] 1989). Much has changed and much has remained the same since the 1980s when this 'kairos' trajectory began. Amongst the continuities between our African and Latin American contexts has been a common process of 'popular' contextual Bible reading,² and it is this that is the focus of my article.

Yet, as has been said, Contextual Bible Study is a form of liberation hermeneutics. Indeed, the term 'contextual' as a designation is an accident of our South African history. The South-African apartheid state, with its overt theological foundation, demonised liberation theology and relentlessly detained anyone associated with such forms of theology. The term 'contextual theology' was coined to subvert the apartheid state's efforts and became 'an umbrella term embracing a variety of particular or situational theologies' in South Africa (Speckman & Kaufmann 2001:xi). Unfortunately, however, because of a lack of sustained collaboration between Latin American-derived theologies and South-African Black Theology (Cochrane 2001:70-73; Maluleke 2001:368), 'Contextual Theology' came to be considered as a distinct form of liberation theology.

However, the term 'contextual', though an accident of our South African history, is not entirely inappropriate. Whilst all Bible reading is contextual, even though some 'ordinary' readers and some 'scholarly' readers find it hard to admit this, liberation hermeneutics in the trajectory of the work of Carlos Mesters and the Centro De Estudios Bíblicos (CEBI) in Latin America (Mesters 1984, 1989, n.d.) and of the Ujamaa Centre in South Africa (from within which Contextual Bible Study has emerged) is intentionally and overtly contextual (West 2006a). Context is not something to be reluctantly acknowledged and then bracketed. Context is an integral part of the interpretive process. As will be indicated, not all contexts are given the same epistemological privilege in liberation hermeneutics. As will be indicated as well, not all forms of 'contextual Bible reading/study' are the same. In this article, the upper-case 'Contextual Bible Study' is used to designate a particular form of contextual Bible reading.

Briefly, Contextual Bible Study is a form of liberation hermeneutics that emerged in South Africa in the 1980s. In it, socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible collaborate in the interpretive process, each bringing different sets of critical resources to the interpretive process. The interpretive process follows the contours of the See-Judge-Act method, moving from social analysis to biblical reflection to social action. The social analysis and the social action are primarily in the hands of the community of ordinary readers using Contextual Bible Study. The biblical reflection draws on an array of biblical studies resources,

2. There has been regular contact and collaboration between, for example, CEBI and the Ujamaa Centre for more than 30 years.

and so the shape of the biblical reflection is primarily the contribution of the socially engaged biblical scholar. The distinguishing feature of Contextual Bible Study, however, is not in its components but in the collaborative work that configures these components.

As indicated in the very first paragraph, Contextual Bible Study shares with other forms of liberation hermeneutics the inclusion of so-called 'ordinary' readers of the Bible, privileging both the non-scholarly dimensions of ordinary readers and the contexts of a particular sector of ordinary readers, the poor and marginalised. Like other forms of liberation hermeneutics, Contextual Bible Study is dialogical, including not only the dialogue between context and the biblical text but also a dialogue between 'ordinary' and 'scholarly' readers as they together – in some way – dialogue with the Bible. It is a collaborative and communal process (De Andrade 1995).

These two features are part of the shared heritage of liberation hermeneutics. Contextual Bible Study is resolutely contextual and dialogical. In the remainder of this article, I shall explore other, sometimes contested, elements of liberation hermeneutics, locating Contextual Bible Study within this analysis. I shall frame each element in terms of a question. The logic of this article is found in the more than 30 years of dialogue amongst practitioners of liberation hermeneutics, especially those forms of liberation hermeneutics in which the Bible is read communally, including both theologians (biblically and theologically 'trained' readers) and 'ordinary' readers of the Bible.

Amongst the more established forms of liberation hermeneutics, and I refer here specifically to Latin American and South African forms, there is an 'new' emerging form of liberation hermeneutics, 'intercultural biblical hermeneutics', with strong ties to South Africa (De Wit *et al.* 2004). Furthermore, because 'intercultural biblical hermeneutics' is being carefully theorised, it offers a useful sounding board against which to reflect on liberation hermeneutics more generally. Locating intercultural biblical hermeneutics within this conversation is not a strange thing to do, for intercultural biblical hermeneutics locates itself within this trajectory. As Hans De Wit (2004a; see also 2012:11), one of its key theoreticians, has argued:

Intercultural hermeneutics attempts to bring the inculturation of biblical stories within one culture into relationship with their inculturation in another context, not for the sake of intercultural discussion itself, but to make it serve the quest for truth, justice, and life. For this reason, we speak about intercultural hermeneutics of liberation. (p. 487)

It is not just this claim that locates intercultural hermeneutics within the trajectory of liberation hermeneutics. It is the pivotal place that both context and dialogue have in its reading praxis. Recognising the Enlightenment's reluctance to embrace the contextual pole of the process of understanding, intercultural biblical hermeneutics is rooted in 'the response to the text', in reception (De Wit 2012:11). In



delimiting the field of intercultural biblical hermeneutics, De Wit (2012:9) begins with the notion that 'texts do something with their readers', particularly sacred texts; and that '[r]eception, a response from the readers, is constitutive of the meaning of texts'.

However, intercultural biblical hermeneutics goes further than most 'genitive theologies', as De Wit (2012:11, 20) refers to them. It extends the dialogue between socially engaged exegetes and ordinary, socio-economically poor readers to others. At the core of this hermeneutics is an 'intercultural' dialogue. The dialogical dimension includes organised interaction and even confrontation across often radically different situations (De Wit 2012:27). Whilst the 'cultural' in 'intercultural' often does denote an exchange across different cultures, De Wit (2012:27, 2004b:25–29) uses the term 'intercultural' as an ethical concept that implies and signifies 'the other' (in Levinas' sense) where the concept of 'cultural' is used 'because of the fundamental meaning of culture in people's mental programming'. Intercultural biblical hermeneutics, argues De Wit (2004a):

... does not demand that genitive hermeneutics give up what belongs to its specificity, namely, the attention to the local situation. Rather, intercultural hermeneutics invites genitive hermeneutics to take a critical look at its expressions of exclusion. (p. 481)

In other words, intercultural hermeneutics reminds contextual hermeneutics of the presence of 'other' 'local' contexts (De Wit 2004a:481).

Already we can see how useful and fertile it is to include intercultural biblical hermeneutics in this discussion. Just as the dialogue with postcolonial biblical hermeneutics provides a critical perspective on liberation hermeneutics (Sugirtharajah 2006a; West 2008a) so too does intercultural biblical hermeneutics. The reason for this is that we recognise, immediately, a family resemblance, and we are confronted with a challenge about what we exclude when we privilege a specific context, namely the context of the poor and marginalised. The challenge posed by intercultural biblical hermeneutics leads into the next section where we consider more carefully the central concept of liberation hermeneutics, the epistemological privilege of the poor.

An epistemological privilege of the poor?

Writing in the 1980s, the late Per Frostin (1988) describes liberation theology as follows:

First, the choice of *social relations* is seen as the main crossroad in theology, whereas there has been a marked tendency, at least since the Enlightenment, to choose *ideas* – for example, Revelation, Reason, Nature, or church doctrine – as distinguishing characteristics in Western theology. (p. 6)

He continues, and it is important to follow his logic:

In other words liberation theologians focus on a new issue seldom discussed in established theology: Who are the interlocutors of

theology? Or, Who are asking the questions that theologians try to answer? (Frostin 1988:6)

'Second', Frostin (1988:6) argues, 'the question of the interlocutors is given a new answer, namely, "a preferential option for the poor"'. Frostin (1988), quoting Gustavo Gutiérrez, affirms:

The chief interlocutor of 'progressivist' Western theology ... has been the educated nonbeliever. Liberation theology, by contrast, has chosen 'nonpersons' as its chief interlocutors, 'the poor, the exploited classes, the marginalized races, all the despised cultures'. (p. 6)

In other words, not all contexts are equal. Liberation theology and one of its children, Contextual Bible Study, privilege particular contexts, namely those of the unnamed poor and marginalised.

Frostin (1988:6) hastens to add that the contrast between the interlocutors of progressivist and liberation theology 'may easily be misunderstood', for '[u]sually, in Western theology the relation to the poor is an ethical, not an epistemological, question'. Such a distinction, Frostin (1988:6) argues (and again it is important to follow his logic), 'cannot do justice to the idea of the poor as interlocutors', for 'solidarity with the poor also has consequences for the perception of the social reality'. In other words, the ethical choice of social relations as the crux of liberation theologies and the poor, marginalised and despised as the primary dialogue partners of liberation theologies *require* the epistemological privilege of the poor, marginalised and despised. Our ethical choices have epistemological consequences, or so they should, and insists liberation hermeneutics.

Here, however, is one of the core tensions between different forms of liberation hermeneutics. The tension is between those 'scholarly' readers who grant the poor and marginalised an ethical privilege, privileging their context, and those 'scholarly' readers who grant the poor and marginalised both an ethical and an epistemological privilege, privileging both their context and their own knowledge of their context. What complicates this debate amongst socially engaged biblical scholars is another dimension as well. For even those who are willing to grant the poor and marginalised both an ethical and an epistemological privilege with respect to their context may not always be willing to grant them the same ethical and epistemological privilege with respect to the biblical text. For some socially engaged biblical scholars, the biblical text is 'our' 'scholarly' terrain, and we privilege our ways of working with, and so our knowledge of, the text.

Whilst most strands of liberation hermeneutics would agree that the context of the poor and marginalised must be ethically privileged, we differ on whether to privilege their knowledge systems with respect to their context and the Bible. Clearly articulated by Jan Luis Segundo in the early 1980s (Segundo 1985), the debate has become even more polarised in the recent years (Nadar 2009). Key to these disagreements and the debate is the role of the intellectuals (in this case the socially engaged biblical scholar) and their assessment of the

ideological (in classical Marxist terms) capacity of the poor and marginalised. Those who argue for the epistemological privilege of the poor and marginalised with respect to their own knowledge of their oppressive contexts work with thin conceptions of ideological hegemony. According to such thin notions of ideological hegemony, dominant ideologies never completely erase the knowledges they subjugate. Hegemony 'is always threatened by the vitality that remains in the forms of life it thwarts' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:125). Hegemony 'is always intrinsically unstable, always vulnerable' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:27).

Furthermore, those who hold to the epistemological privilege of the poor and marginalised recognise that domination has a greater impact on the *socio-political opportunities* for resistance of the poor and marginalised than it does on the *religio-psycho-social capacity* of the poor and marginalised to resist domination. No matter how severe the domination, argues James Scott (1990), dignity always demands a response to domination. In cases of intense and sustained surveillance by the forces of domination, dignity's expression finds its place in the hidden transcript, a discourse 'of dignity, of negation, and of justice' that is articulated and elaborated in those social sites that the marginalised are able to forge and secure in the face of surveillance (Scott 1990:114). The poor are not poor in mind. Central to Scott's (1990) analysis is the recognition that subordinate classes are:

... less constrained at the level of thought and ideology, since they can in secluded settings speak with comparative safety, and more constrained at the level of political action and struggle, where the daily exercise of power sharply limits the options available to them. (p. 91)

However, domination demands moments of 'self-disclosure' (Scott 1990:115), most of which are made in contexts controlled by the dominated themselves but some of which are made in the public realm. South Africa's so-called 'service delivery protests' are a good example of the latter. The hidden and public are, of course, linked. What becomes public has usually been extensively rehearsed in secluded sites controlled by the poor and marginalised themselves.

The *Abahlali baseMjondolo* social movement in South Africa is clear about this. Lindela Figlan, one of their leaders, explains in detail how they – those who live in shack-settlements – are agents of their own resistance. Figlan (2012) insists on the agency of the poor: 'But poor as we are we achieve our own dignity.' He (Figlan 2012) then goes on to enumerate the variety of sites in which dignity is achieved, saying that '[s]ome people achieve dignity in their churches. Some achieve dignity through culture, in something like a choir'. Fundamentally, however, he (Figlan 2012) says:

We achieve dignity in the togetherness of our struggle. Our struggle is a space of dignity. Here we can express our suffering, we can think together and we can support each other. (n.p.)

So when, on 19 March 2005, a group of black shack-dwellers barricaded a major road in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, it was not simply a spontaneous reaction. It was a

deliberate response to domination forged within the many sites in the shack-settlement in which their dignity was constructed and nurtured (Gibson 2011). As Figlan says, '*Abahlali* has been organizing and mobilizing to build the power of the poor from below.' However, Figlan is not referring here to the organising of 'others'. 'We do not organise people', he says. 'We organise ourselves' (Figlan 2012).

Contextual Bible Study, some of us argue, constructs such a site. Here is a potential site that can be controlled by poor and marginalised ordinary readers, provided they are organised. If they control the Contextual Bible Study site, their local knowledge will be used in the interpretive process. Whilst the forms of discourse used may seem, at first, to participate in the dominant theological discourse, this is only because the dominant discourse is, on closer analysis, 'a plastic idiom or dialect that is capable of carrying an enormous variety of meanings, including those that are subversive of their use as intended by the dominant', for in most contexts of domination 'the terrain of dominant discourse is the only plausible arena of struggle' (Scott 1990:102–103). As time together grows, so too does another vocabulary that is more organic to their own reality, one forged amongst the marginalised themselves.

However, there are those socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians who embrace strong notions of hegemony, arguing that the poor and marginalised have been 'colonised' by the dominant ideology and are trapped in 'a culture of silence' (Frostin 1988:10, alluding to Freire 1985:72). Segundo, as indicated, is a Latin American proponent of this view, arguing that the analytical tools required to understand how domination works 'are beyond the grasp of the majority of people' (Segundo 1985:28). An option is made for the poor, but the categories and contribution of their experience are subordinated to or translated into the terms of the intellectually trained in the social sciences. Significantly, both CEBI and Ujamaa, organisations organically related to local communities of the marginalised, have moved away from strong conceptions of 'a culture of silence' (Dreher 2004; Schinelo 2009; West 1991, 2009b). The poor have taught us.

Here then is an area of disagreement amongst socially engaged biblical scholars – to what extent should we privilege the social analysis of the 'ordinary' readers with whom we read the Bible? Are we willing to hear and enter into 'the logic' of local communities (Mahmood 2005), adopting an 'emic' approach, or do we insist on using our own 'external', 'etic', categories of analysis?

A second related area of disagreement, as I have said, is the extent to which we privilege or even include the *biblical* analysis of the 'ordinary' readers with whom we read the Bible. Historically and institutionally, the dominant modes of analysis in our discipline of biblical studies have been historical and sociological (Lategan 1984), and so the formative years of liberation hermeneutics, whether in Brazil, South Africa or the Philippines, were dominated by socio-historical analysis of the Bible (Vaage 1997; West 1995:188–



219; Wittenberg 2007). The consequence of privileging socio-historical analysis in contextual Bible reading has been the foregrounding of the 'scholarly' reader and the 'silencing', to some extent, of the 'ordinary' reader (West 1993). However, partly in recognition of the non-egalitarian effects of socio-historical modes of reading the Bible and partly because of poststructuralist critique (West 1984:17, 1995), socially engaged biblical scholars have gradually embraced the full range of other modes of reading, including a diverse array of literary-semiotic and thematic-metaphoric modes (Croatto 1987; Dreher 2004; Míguez 1995; Nadar 2001).

Literary-type and thematic-type 'scholarly' modes of reading, though not how most ordinary readers interpret the Bible, do offer more egalitarian entry points for ordinary readers to participate on more equal terms with scholarly readers (West 2006a). So these have become the access points for a sharing of the critical textual resources of socially engaged biblical scholars. Ordinary readers are able without much difficulty to make their contributions about, for example, the kinds of characters and relationships between characters in a biblical text. In turn, literary resources, focusing for example on the relationships between the various groups of characters in Mark's temple narrative (Mk 11:27–13:2), usually open up space for socio-historical resources, enabling ordinary readers of the Bible within the Contextual Bible Study process to probe the economic systems of the city-temple 'sacred economy' (Boer 2007; West 2011). This shift, from the literary to the socio-historical, ensures that Segundo's concern about the presence of resources from the social sciences is taken up. The reason for this uptake is that it is socio-historical biblical resources that most clearly enable a structured and systematic engagement with the Bible by ordinary readers. This is because liberation hermeneutics is not only about an analogy of struggle (the biblical text in its context//we in our context) but also about an analogy of method ('critical' modes of interpreting text// 'critical' modes of interpreting context) (Cavalcanti 1995; Mosala 1989).

Notwithstanding the importance of these social-science resources, what about the resources of ordinary readers of the Bible? There seems to be a growing recognition in liberation hermeneutics that organised ordinary readers bring an array of 'critical' reading resources to biblical interpretation (Tshehla 2002; West 2002), particularly when biblical interpretation takes place within a process such as Contextual Bible Study (West 2008b). Here then is a related area of disagreement amongst socially engaged biblical scholars – to what extent should we privilege the interpretive resources of ordinary readers of the Bible?

For intercultural biblical hermeneutics, there is no privileged local context or community. The 'infinity' of 'the other', both in terms of the text's eschatological horizon and in the multiplicity of local contexts (De Wit 2012:47–49), keeps the reading process open and incomplete. There is always another appropriation and another reading community. Yet the other is never vague, is always specific (De Wit 2012:49). Through 'empirical' reading-reports, an integral part of the

process (De Wit 2012:18), we come to know the other and how this particular other reads (De Wit 2012:27–32). Whilst intercultural biblical hermeneutics has tended to include the poor and marginalised amongst its reading groups, their presence is not necessary to any particular encounter between groups. However, their (organised) presence is central to liberation hermeneutics.

Furthermore, because the poor and marginalised are not a specific consideration of intercultural biblical hermeneutics, most of the related questions that emerge around privileging this sector of Bible readers are not addressed directly in the literature. Indeed, as we shall see, the role of the socially engaged exegete and the place of particular dimensions of the text are variable elements. They are mapped as part of the empirical process (De Wit 2012:44), but they are not prescribed as part of the intercultural reading process, as they are in Contextual Bible Study, where there is a clear and deliberate movement from the in-front-of-the-text dimensions to the on-the-text dimensions to the behind-the-text dimensions and then back to the in-front-of-the-text dimensions of the particular biblical text being engaged (West 2011).

Another aspect that is addressed by intercultural biblical hermeneutics is the contribution of ordinary readers to biblical scholarship. Whilst intercultural biblical hermeneutics has no particular role for the socially engaged biblical scholar, Hans de Wit remains 'deeply convinced of the importance of exegesis for spontaneous understanding of the text' (De Wit 2012:71). He goes on to examine what can and does happen 'when ordinary and professional readers sit across from each other' (De Wit 2012:71), but without making it clear how the presence of each and their respective resources is constitutive of the reading process. Nevertheless, there is a clear recognition that ordinary readings offer a 'gift' to the exegete and can 'orient' the exegete in her or his scholarly work (De Wit 2012:78, 72). It has always struck me as strange that a method that advocates for the epistemological privilege of the poor – liberation hermeneutics – has been so reluctant to acknowledge the contribution of the poor to the process of understanding the biblical text, notwithstanding the significance of Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Cardenal 1976). Intercultural biblical hermeneutics adds its voice to those of us who insist on the 'exegetical' contribution of the poor.

Socio-political life interests?

Another area of contestation in liberation hermeneutics has been the emphasis on the socio-political, which until recently was uncontested (Croatto 1995:235). The root reality of liberation theology in its early forms was the economic (Soares-Prabhu 1991). 'The struggle' was essentially against systemic economic exploitation, hence phrases like 'an option for the poor' and 'the epistemological privilege of the poor'. Whilst other sectors and other forms of oppression were acknowledged (Frostin 1988:182), they were seen as subordinate to the economic-political domain.

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, however, the privileging of Marxist socio-economic analysis within biblical liberation hermeneutics was contested, initially by feminists who argued that patriarchy was another foundational system of exploitation (Fiorenza 1981; Trible 1973). Others soon joined women to contest the privileging of the economic domain of life so that biblical liberation hermeneutics has been taken up around an array of domains, including gender, caste, HIV, disability, sexuality and ecology but always from the margins of these domains (Sugirtharajah 2006b).

Yet, given the importance of Marxist categories and concepts in the historical formation of liberation hermeneutics as well as the ongoing neo-colonial economic profile of our globalised world with South Africa itself trapped within economically driven processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation (Hart 2013), South African Contextual Bible Study asks whether it is not important to hold onto a fundamental economic-political orientation in our work (Míguez-Bonino 2006), even though we recognise that we have to 're-translate' Marx and related economic resources in terms of our current realities and their intersected marginalisations.

Here then is another area of potential disagreement amongst socially engaged biblical scholars. Even though we agree that the economic and political are significant features of our work, to what extent do we allow for a multiplicity of intersecting marginalisations? Put differently, where do we locate ourselves along the continuum of liberation-postcolonialism criticism with fairly definite economic-based binaries on the one end and a plurality of hybridities on the other end?

Although it shares a socio-economic legacy with liberation hermeneutics, intercultural biblical hermeneutics 'allows' for any significant contextual or textual 'feature' to be distinctive for a particular reading group. Yet in the data to date, 'it is possible to map a number of central factors such as culture, church affiliation, faith tradition, and biography' (De Wit 2012:46). Because the reading process is left open to each particular reading group, the life interests that are brought to the text are diverse. No particular set of social factors or social systems are foregrounded as they are in liberation hermeneutics.

The substantive value and shape of scripture?

Biblical liberation hermeneutics in its various forms has tended to work with the Bible as sacred scripture. Whilst we may mean different things by the notion of 'sacred scripture', we would agree that the Bible is 'substantive' rather than merely 'instrumental' (Cady 1986) in its participation in the collaborative and dialogical interpretive process. This has been a particular legacy of Latin American forms of contextual Bible reading. However, South African forms of liberation hermeneutics, along with feminist and

more recent postcolonial forms, have raised hard questions about the substantive contribution of the Bible.

The question of the Bible's substantive value is related to the question of what Albert Nolan has called 'the shape' of scripture (Nolan 1988). What 'shape' or, to use the term used by J. Severino Croatto (Croatto 1987), what 'semantic axis' does scripture have? The early days of liberation hermeneutics answered that the Bible has a liberatory shape or semantic axis. Until recently (Tamez 2003), Latin American voices have been fairly insistent on a hermeneutics of trust, in which we can trust the basic liberatory character of scripture. Any distortion of God's liberatory project was put down to the church's misuse of scripture not to the inherent texture of scripture itself (Richard 1995:273).

This consensus has, however, been vigorously contested within southern Africa by Black Theology (Mofokeng 1988; Mosala 1989), African womanist/feminist work (Nadar 2001) and postcolonial biblical hermeneutics (Dube 1997). From these perspectives, the Bible is itself a site of struggle, representing both liberating and dominating discourses engaged in overt or covert contestation. Contextual Bible Study works overtly with a contested Bible (Anderson 2009), drawing on the full array of socio-historical (Mosala 1993) or literary (Trible 1973) or symbolic-metaphorical (Schneiders 1989) resources in order to discern the contending voices of particular texts, privileging marginalised voices. However, for some, the voices of the marginalised within the text are so compromised by layers of dominating discourse that the Bible can only be an instrumentalist resource, not a substantive resource (Cady 1986; West 1995:103-130). Nonetheless, some of these continue to use the Bible because even though they do not, they recognise that the masses of ordinary readers consider it a sacred and substantive 'silo or storeroom' (Mofokeng 1988:40).

It is difficult to deny that the Bible has a multiplicity of often contending voices. It is also difficult to deny that the Bible is a sacred, significant and substantive resource for the majority of those ordinary readers with whom we work. Whilst they do not usually have the particular critical capacities of our discipline, they have their own strategies for discerning liberatory strands amongst the more oppressive voices of scripture. They have forged their own ways of 'conjuring' with scripture (Maluleke 2000; Smith 1994). Whilst ordinary readers can and do either bracket or theologically reconstitute those details of scripture that do not fit within their ideo-theological orientation, 'scholarly' readers have to deal with the detail. Given the enormous plurality of voices that current biblical scholarship has conjured up through its diverse methodologies, we too make similar moves to our 'ordinary' co-readers. We too order the detail we discern, providing it with a shape. Like ordinary readers, scholarly readers use their ideo-theological orientations to construct an order or shape to scripture (West 2009a). The shape is not inherent to scripture, it is ideo-theologically constructed.



Recognising this, but also recognising that the Bible remains a substantive resource for social transformation in South Africa, the Contextual Bible Study process works overtly with the notion of contestation but limits this contestation to two primary scriptural voices, following to some extent the schema suggested by the early work of Walter Brueggemann (1992a, 1992b, 1993). Whilst this schema simplifies the complexity of contestation (Mosala 1989), it makes contestation a distinctive feature of the Contextual Bible Study methodology.

Here then is another area of potential disagreement amongst socially engaged biblical scholars. What shape do we give to scripture, and how do we engage the notion of the ideological shape of scripture with the ordinary readers with whom we work?

Intercultural biblical hermeneutics offers a substantial resource in this regard. 'The task of intercultural hermeneutics', argues De Wit (2012:46), 'is primarily to offer insight into the degree to which people are prisoners of dominant reading traditions.' By encountering how 'the other' reads the same text, through organised intercultural confrontation, readers within a particular cultural context are 'extracted' from their dominant reading traditions (De Wit 2012:64). Indeed, through the intercultural encounter, the text is granted (an-other) chance to speak in which 'the text cracks dominant cultural, social, political, and religious codes in a radical and absolutely revelatory way' (De Wit 2012:65). Though its starting point is the Bible as 'scripture' (De Wit 2012:60), intercultural biblical hermeneutics has the potential to take our discussion beyond the current terms of 'a hermeneutics of trust' versus 'a hermeneutics of suspicion', for both the ordinary and the scholarly reader.

Facilitation or animation processes?

Biblical liberation hermeneutics is fundamentally a process, but the precise nature of the process is open to discussion and even debate. Liberation hermeneutics has tended over time to become more creative and open to a diverse range of facilitative techniques. There are, however, certain constants. The See-Judge-Act framework captures rather well some of the constants. Contextual Bible reading begins with an analysis of reality – See. Though as we have seen, the question is who provides the categories. Furthermore, the concepts of analysis may differ. Having interrogated the lived reality of the particular marginalised sector taking up the process, the process moves from analysis of context to the next phase, bringing contextual analysis into dialogue with prophetic biblical resources. This reality is 'Judged' in terms of the shape of God's prophetic project in the biblical and theological tradition. Though, again, precisely what the shape of God's project is is open to ideological interpretation. Liberation hermeneutics then moves into the next phase, action – Act. Having analysed contextual realities, having judged these realities against the shape of God's redemptive project, the community now acts to ensure that the 'kin-dom' (Philpott 1993) of God comes 'on earth, as it is in heaven'.

Within the Ujamaa Centre's work, participants in Contextual Bible Study – our version of liberation hermeneutics – are required to develop three related sets of actions: immediate actions that can be taken up without too much delay or too many additional resources; intermediate actions that, whilst feasible, require further planning; visionary long-term actions that draw us forward into the future of God's project.

Another constant of liberation hermeneutics is its 'liturgical' scaffolding or its 'spirituality' (Petersen 1991). Contextual Bible Study, as an example of liberation hermeneutics, participates in and is resourced by liberatory liturgical resources. Similarly, small-group work, buzz-groups, bibliodrama, music, drawing and many other participatory modes of communicating are also integral to liberation hermeneutics. These are deployed in different combinations depending on the particular community and its project. In many cases, local resources are used in combination with the 'critical' textual resources of biblical scholars (West 2008b).

Time or duration is another component of liberation hermeneutics. Theoretically, Contextual Bible Study could be considered as a form of 'heterotopia' (West 2009b). As Michel Foucault observes, one of the features of a heterotopia is that they 'are most often linked to slices of time', which 'open onto what might be termed ... heterochronies' (Foucault 1967:5). However, because Foucault believes, incorrectly, that time, unlike space, 'was detached from the sacred in the nineteenth century' (Foucault 1967:2; betraying his European social location), he is unable to recognise, fully,³ that sacred heterotopias are sites that connect across sanctified time, so that, for example, a Contextual Bible Study can connect HIV-positive people in their current context to the textual and socio-historical world of a Jesus who stands in solidarity with the sick and stigmatised. Practically, Contextual Bible Study requires real time. As John Riches from the Glasgow based 'Contextual Bible Study' project says, Contextual Bible Study slows down the interpretive process, enabling an in-depth engagement with each other and the scriptures (Riches *et al.* 2010:41). Most 'ordinary' biblical interpretation is quick, with an almost immediate appropriation of aspects of the biblical text. In contrast, liberation biblical interpretation is slow, enabling a re-reading of the text and a recognition of 'textual'⁴ detail that may not be readily apparent. So enough time is needed to maintain a slow pace throughout the interpretive process. Socio-politically, duration is important in allowing participants from marginalised communities to take control of the site and make it a safe site. If, as some of us argue, ordinary readers inhabit contending realms, namely the realm of the hidden transcript and the realm of the public transcript, liberation hermeneutics has to forge a safe and sequestered site before the poor and marginalised will be willing to share, tentatively at first, aspects of their hidden transcript.

3. Foucault does come close to some recognition of this sacred sense of time in his truncated discussion of Polynesian vacation villages (Foucault 1967:5).

4. Again, the 'textual' detail may be literary, socio-historical or thematic-symbolic.



Facilitation is a key feature of liberation hermeneutics and is a skill that has been nurtured in a range of liberation struggles. Whilst most forms of liberation hermeneutics would agree on all of the elements of facilitation mentioned so far, we differ on the 'textual' dimensions with which to begin the process and on which to focus through the process. Some argue for a socio-historical entry point into scripture, notwithstanding its potentially alienating effects on ordinary readers.⁵ Contextual Bible Study, as I have already indicated, begins with the most accessible mode of reading, the thematic-symbolic, then moves to the literary and only then moves to the socio-historical before finally concluding once again with thematic-symbolic appropriation (West 2011). So whilst most of the facilitation or animation process is reasonably uncontentious, we may differ on how we work with the biblical text within this process.

In this respect, there are fairly clear differences with intercultural Bible reading. Within this project, there is no distinctive facilitation process. Indeed, '[g]roups read the text in the way they are accustomed to reading scripture' (De Wit 2004b:45). So whilst there is plenty of recognition in the literature of the significance of small-group communal Bible reading (De Wit 2012:49–58), the reading process is not constructed as an animated or facilitated process in a particular way, as it is, for example, in the Ujamaa Centre's Contextual Bible Study process.

From praxis to theology?

An area on which the various forms of liberation hermeneutics agree is the character of the relationship between action and reflection, namely, praxis. In liberation criticism, biblical interpretation is 'a second act' (Frostin 1988:10). The first act is the praxis of action and reflection. The action, we would agree, must be actual action in a particular local struggle. Integrally related to this action is reflection on the action, and integrally related to this action-induced reflection is further action, refined or reconstituted by the on-going cycle of reflection on action. Out of this first act of praxis, second-order liberation biblical and theological interpretation is constructed. How liberation interpretations are constructed and by whom is the subject of on-going debate as we have seen. Some, like Segundo and Per Frostin, favour a strong role for middle-class theologians and organic intellectuals in assisting the poor to break their silence 'and create their own language' (Frostin 1988:10), but others, including the Ujamaa Centre, argue for a much more prominent place for the poor and marginalised themselves, recognising their already present 'incipient theologies' (Cochrane 1999). Whilst there is a role for socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians in facilitating a more structured and systematic prophetic theology from 'people's theology' (Nolan 1996), there can be no prophetic theology without people's theology (West 2012).

Liberation hermeneutics agrees across its variant forms that the Bible-reading process and the forms of action that

⁵ See, for example, the 'Four Sides' approach of Gilberto Gorgulho used by CEBI in the south of Brazil in the late 1980s and early 1990s, discussed in West (1995:218).

flow from it must change reality, including the reality of the church. So one of the 'acts' of contextual Bible reading is to facilitate the 'in/corporation' of its processes and products into the very fabric of the church (Cochrane 1999; West 2005). Liberation hermeneutics is in many respects a collaborative interventionist strategy, harnessing religious resources in a safe and sequestered site with which collaboratively to articulate and own local, marginalised, embodied theologies and then to in/corporate them into the life of the church, transforming it for the purposes of establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Liberation hermeneutics in general, and Contextual Bible Study as a particular form, is not a research 'technique' or 'method'. The reflective moments in the process of praxis may take on research components but always in the service of the liberation project.

As indicated, intercultural biblical hermeneutics is concerned with transformation. Organised (intercultural) confrontation produces forms of transformation, and intercultural hermeneutics attempts to document and analyse the nature of this transformation. Indeed, one of the objectives of this method is to address what it sees as an inadequacy of liberation hermeneutics, namely a more careful account of 'whether the praxis of liberation is a product of the new, careful way of Bible reading, or whether the text is already held hostage by an existing praxis' (De Wit 2012:63). Intercultural biblical hermeneutics probes the relationship between Bible reading and social action or transformation and asks what kinds of social action or transformation actually emerge from Bible reading. De Wit notes that the empirical material gathered by the intercultural Bible reading project shows, in fact, very little praxis of the socio-political kind. Bible study does not, the research shows, often lead directly into action (De Wit 2012:63). However, this does not mean, he argues, that forms of liberation are not present. They are, but they are found in 'the small gesture' (De Wit 2012:65), not the macro-systemic action envisioned by liberation praxis. He does however acknowledge that the intercultural methodology might offer resources for development work (De Wit 2012:85–86).

The challenge here to liberation hermeneutics is important. If we are to recognise the multiple nodes of marginalisation, and their intersections, we must also recognise more complex and more modest moments of 'liberation'. However, such recognitions should not deflect us from our heritage, a process of See-Judge-Act in which Contextual Bible Study ends, as a constituent part of the process, in systemic forms of action, ranging from the liturgical to the economic. Indeed, the failure of intercultural biblical hermeneutics 'to produce' socio-political action may be a product of the method itself, which is why it is important to locate it within the more traditional practice and discourse of liberation hermeneutics.

With whom do we work?

We return in the concluding section of this article to context. Liberation hermeneutics is rooted in the realities of the poor and marginalised. Whilst we may differ on the extent to which we 'scholarly' readers grant an epistemological privilege to



the knowledge and analysis and resources of the poor and marginalised, we agree that 'their' realities are our starting point. However, as José Míguez-Bonino said to us when he visited us in South Africa shortly after our liberation (in 1994), we have to do careful and detailed analysis of received concepts such as 'the poor'. He reflected, sadly, that the solidarity amongst the poor and other marginalised sectors could no longer be taken for granted. The 'new poor', he said, preyed on each other instead of standing with each other.⁶

What does this kind of analysis mean for what used to be our starting point, namely, the 'generative themes' emerging from amongst the organised poor themselves? For some, the poor and marginalised are or have become ideologically co-opted and corrupted, requiring a more directly interventionist orientation from the (organically) socially engaged 'scholarly' reader (Nadar 2009, 2012). However, even those who emphasise the 'false consciousness' of the poor and marginalised would not question that they are the primary site of liberation hermeneutics.

What is less clear is whether the religious resources of the older African Independent or Indigenous or Initiated Churches and the newer forms of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity ought to be included in liberation hermeneutics. Within the Ujamaa Centre and African biblical hermeneutics more generally, there is little doubt that these are sites in which liberation hermeneutics should be located and even sites which have a contribution to make to liberation hermeneutics. We have, however, been challenged for doing so by some of our Latin American colleagues.

More problematic, in both Africa and Latin America, are 'indecent' or 'queer' forms of marginalisation (Althaus-Reid 2000, 2003), such as the marginalisation of homosexuals and sex workers. The advent of HIV has enabled the boundary between the decent and the indecent to be breached (Stone 1999), and the recognition that sex work is work and therefore a sector within the context of economic justice has reconfigured this terrain as well (Ipsen 2009).

Intercultural biblical hermeneutics has no inherited constraints in this regard. All ordinary readers are equal (De Wit 2004b). Indeed, the inclusion of all these 'others' is the fundamental ethic of intercultural biblical hermeneutics.

Conclusion

These then are some of the strands of theory and method that constitute liberation hermeneutics. Contextual Bible Study, as a particularly South African form, has its own distinctive shape, as does the more recent intercultural biblical hermeneutics. The analysis of this article, recognising both the family resemblances across liberation hermeneutics and the distinctive features of particular forms, is offered as a contribution to our ongoing collaboration. The social movements that gave birth to liberation hermeneutics in the 1970s, whether in Latin American or South Africa, are not as

⁶The South African films *Tsotsi* and *Son of Man* each explore this new reality.

vibrant as they were. So the need for analysis, dialogue and collaboration is even more important now, particularly as we in South Africa enter the twentieth year of our liberation.

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