
Mobilizing Matthew among the Marginalized: Thirty Years of Community-based Bible Study in South Africa

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Introduction

Contextual Bible Study (CBS) is a Bible re-reading process in which communities of the poor and marginalized bring their social struggles to the Bible seeking resources for social transformation. Such communities in South Africa are constituted almost entirely of African Christians. Unfortunately, many of them inhabit social realities that their churches are reluctant to engage, such as HIV, gender-based violence, unemployment, disability, LGBTQIA+ sexualities, etc. CBS is a resource for those on the margins of the church, those whom the church has stigmatized and marginalized. Within CBS processes socially engaged biblical scholars collaborate with organized groups of such poor and marginalized communities.

Early CBS work in South Africa, in the late 1980s, facilitated by the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB), which later became the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research (Ujamaa Centre),¹ had a distinctively racial and economic emphasis. The racial capitalism² of colonialism and apartheid was the primary reality with which CBS engaged. Our early CBS work therefore drew extensively on the book of Exodus,³ a key resource within liberation theologies,⁴ and Mark's gospel. We chose Mark's gospel because of its overt political and economic emphasis, drawing on the scholarly trajectory of Herman Waetjen,⁵ Ched Myers,⁶ and Richard Horsley.⁷ One of our earliest CBS on Mark's gospel probed the well-known story of the man who comes to Jesus asking

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about eternal life (Mark 10:17-22),⁸ recognizing that his "much property" (10:22) was the product of unjust economic systems, which is why Jesus summons him to "go and sell all you possess and give to the poor" (10:21).

Whenever we used Mark, we were conscious of those Markan texts which were taken up by Matthew and used differently, following the scholarly consensus that Matthew used Mark among its sources.⁹ We were also conscious of those texts within Matthew which were unique to Matthew. Both offered us texts with a distinctly Matthean theological orientation.

CBS methodology

Central to CBS is the threefold See-Judge-Act process,¹⁰ developed by the Catholic worker-priest movement in Europe in the 1940s and taken up in many Third World contexts.¹¹ Matthew's gospel

1. Based within the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

2. Lebamang Sebidi, "The Dynamics of the Black Struggle and Its Implications for Black Theology," in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, eds. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), 31.

3. Margarete P. L. Nürnberger, ed., *I Will Send You to Pharaoh: Bible Studies on Exodus 1-15, Bible Studies in Context #2* (Pietermaritzburg: Institute for the Study of the Bible, 1992).

4. J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

5. Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

6. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988).

7. Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

8. Jonathan A. Draper, and Gerald O. West, "Anglicans and Scripture in South Africa," in *Bounty in Bondage: The Anglican Church in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of Edward King, Dean of Cape Town*, eds. Frank England and Torquil J. M. Paterson (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1989), 49-50.

9. See for example the analysis in Gordon D Fee, "A Text-Critical Look at the Synoptic Problem," in *Novum Testamentum* 22, no. Fasc. 1 (1980).

10. Gerald O. West, "Reading the Bible with the Marginalised: The Value/s of Contextual Bible Reading," in *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015).

11. Lillemor Erlander, *Faith in the World of Work: On the Theology of Work as Lived by the French Worker-Priests and British Industrial Mission*, *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis Studia Doctrinae Christianae Upsaliensis* 32 (Uppsala & Stockholm: Acta Univ; Almqvist & Wicksell, 1991); Justin Sands, "Introducing Cardinal Cardijn's See-Judge-Act as an Interdisciplinary Method to Move Theory into Practice," in

What can we learn from scripture about God's kingdom on earth? Having analyzed our realities (See), CBS brings scripture into dialogue with our realities (Judge), using scripture as a prophetic lens through which to see how God wants to transform our contexts.

has guided us in how we understand each of the moments in the See-Judge-Act process.

CBS begins with "See," seeing the realities of our context, both individual and systemic. Jesus summoned his disciples to discern "the signs of the times" (Matt 16:3), lamenting that the religious leaders of that time were unable to truly "see" their context. CBS is particularly attentive to seeing reality "from below," understanding how those who have been marginalized experience their lived realities. CBS then calls us to "Judge," judging this reality from God's perspective in scripture. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). What can we learn from scripture about God's kingdom on earth? Having analyzed our realities (See), CBS brings scripture into dialogue with our realities (Judge), using scripture as a prophetic lens through which to see how God wants to transform our contexts. CBS then continues to summon us to action, "Act." If our contextual realities do not conform to God's kingdom on earth, then what needs to change and how can we contribute to working with God for this change? When Jesus saw the reality of the two blind men sitting on the side of the road, he asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Matt 20:32). Seeing reality in the light of God's prophetic vision for God's kingdom on earth requires us, like Jesus, to act. "Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him" (Matt 20:34). Our actions will take many forms, but act we must, moved by compassion for those who yearn for God's kingdom on earth.¹²

The See-Judge-Act process is a key component of every CBS, as we begin with the lived realities of the poor and marginalized, as we identify a potentially resonant biblical text and construct a CBS, and as we move together into transformative action. The Ujamaa Centre does its CBS work within five areas, which we refer to as Bread Theology (economics, politics, etc.), Body Theology (culture, gender, HIV, disability, sexuality, masculinity,

etc.), Earth Theology (land, ecology, etc.), People's Theology (emerging theologies from within marginalised communities), and Public Theology (a prophetic representation of people's theologies engaging with the public realm and the theology of the churches). CBS was constituted within the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (Bread Theology), but gradually began to broaden its focus from race and/as class to cultural contestations, gender struggles, and then, via work on HIV, to a focus on masculinity (Body Theology).¹³ Matthew's gospel has been a valuable resource in each of these areas.

Body theology

In the post-liberation era in South Africa, since 1994, there has been a marked return to cultural considerations. Culture has always been a central feature within African Theology, but culture had a subordinate place within South Africa's liberation theologies, South African Black Theology and South African Contextual Theology. After political liberation the focus shifted back to culture.¹⁴ The Ujamaa Centre's Bible Week programme for 1998 had the theme "The Role of the Bible in the Current South African Context," where we explicitly engaged in CBS work on African culture. South African churches include both European missionary-established churches (Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) and African Initiated/ Independent churches (AICs). Among the concerns in missionary-established churches is the question of the role of African ancestors within Christian faith.¹⁵

There was engaged conversation during the Bible Week on this subject as we invited a colleague, Jonathan Draper, to share his work on Matt 1:1-17. Draper contrasts the aversion Western readers have to biblical genealogies to the fascination African readers and hearers of the Bible have to biblical recitations of ancestors.¹⁶ That Matthew introduces Jesus by reciting his ancestors is a significant factor for African Christians, given the similar custom in African indigenous culture and religion.¹⁷ Indeed, such recitations of ancestors was one of the features of the Bible that drew the first

13. For some of this history see Gerald O. West, "Tamar Summons Jesus: A Trans-Textual (2 Sam 13:1-22, Mark 5:22-43, Matt 20:17-34) Search for Sectorial Solidarity with Respect to Gender and Masculinity," in *Transgression and Transformation: Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer Biblical Interpretation as Creative Interventions*, eds. L. Juliana Claassens, Christl M. Maier, and Funlola O. Olojede (London: T & T Clark, 2021).

14. Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Black Theology as Public Discourse," in *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life: Multi-Event 1999 Academic Workshop Papers*, ed. James R. Cochrane (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1998).

15. Kwame Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective on Ancestors," in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 32, no. 4 (2015).

16. This was later published as Jonathan A. Draper, "A South Africa Contextual Reading of Matthew 1:1-17," in *Matthew: Texts @ Contexts* eds. Nicole Wilkinson Duran and James P. Grimshaw (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013).

17. Jeff Opland, "Structural Patterns in the Performance of a Xhosa Izibongo," in *Comparative Literature* 48, no. 2 (1996).

Religions 9, no. 4 (2018).

12. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Kin-dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal" in *In Our Own Voices: Latinola Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamin Valentine (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 171-190.

indigenous hearers to the Bible.¹⁸ Given the resonance of his work among the Bible Week participants, Draper went on to construct a CBS based on his analysis of Matt 1:1-18 to be used among clergy struggling with the place of African culture in their churches,¹⁹ facilitating safe and sacred space within which to discuss a deeply contentious issue:

1. Listen to a dramatic reading of Matt 1:1-18. Do you find a table of descent meaningful and interesting? Have you ever done a Bible study on this passage? Why or why not? Why do you think Matthew puts it at the beginning of his Gospel? (Compare Matt 3:9; 8:11; 22:32)
2. What role do your ancestors/family trees play in your own culture? Does it make a difference who your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and extended family were/are? Do they continue to play a role in the lives of the living? (e.g. Ukubuyisa/umsebenzi [African death-related rituals]; roots; psychotherapy; socialization; genetic characteristics). How do these cultural dynamics influence you in reading this passage?
3. Women are mentioned in key points in this table (vv. 3, 5, 6, 16). Is it significant? What kind of women are mentioned? How do their mention and historical roles affect the table of descent?
4. If Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, as the text suggests, does this invalidate his ancestral lineage? Does this text affirm the importance of ancestors, or does it challenge it, or both?
5. Has sharing in a cross-cultural group opened new dimensions for you? Could biblical texts be a meeting place for people from different South African cultures, religions, or non-religions to explore their commonalities or difference? How or how not?
6. What practical possibilities for changed attitudes or actions might come from the group's reading?

Our work on African culture led to work with women. Women had grown tired of waiting for their struggle to be taken seriously during the anti-apartheid struggle, and so, soon after liberation they summoned the Ujamaa Centre to work with them and then to work with their men. Our work with men began through our work with women, as women called us to do CBS work on women in leadership and gender-based violence. HIV then opened another avenue to work with men, with women urging their men to be sexually responsible by knowing their HIV status. Women wanted men who were willing to reject dominant forms of masculinity.

18. Draper, "A South Africa Contextual Reading of Matthew 1:1-17," in *Matthew: Texts @ Contexts*, 25-26, Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Leiden and Pietermaritzburg: Brill and Cluster Publications, 2016), 103-104.

19. Draper, "A South Africa Contextual Reading of Matthew 1:1-17," in *Matthew: Texts @ Contexts*, 43-44.

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Women's agency has been key to the work of the Ujamaa Centre, for it is often women who take the lead, within the constraints of patriarchy, for local social transformation. Women's agency has often been a key theme in our CBS work. In a recent CBS (2021) working with the World Council of Churches (WCC) to produce a CBS resource on health and healing, we used Matt 15:21-31 to engage with the topic of "health care inclusion for those who are marginalized by ethnicity, disability, gender, or age." Each of the CBS in this WCC resource have a short note on the health topic and a short note on the biblical text before moving into the CBS. The note on the health topic focused on the World Health Organization's (WHO) notion of equity, which "according to WHO, is the absence of unfair, avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically or by other dimensions of inequality (e.g., sex, gender, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation)." The note goes on to state: "Health is a fundamental human right. Political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, environmental, legal and institutional structures determine how power and resources are distributed, which in turn determine how people are born, live and die."

This note is then followed by a note on Matt 15:21-31, situating this text within Matthew and in relationship to Mark. Within the note we are overt in our choice of Matthew's version of the healing story "because Matthew makes it clear how the healing in this particular case leads to many other healings." The CBS then follows, and is a good example of the shape of a typical CBS:

1. Listen to a dramatic reading of Matt 15:21-31 in different translations.
2. What is the text about?
3. Who are the characters in these stories and what do we know about them? How are these two stories connected? Draw a picture or create a drama that shows the connections between these healing stories.
4. Re-read verses 22-24. In these verses the disciples bring their concerns about the woman to Jesus. What is it that worries the disciples about this woman? How does Jesus respond to

the disciples? What is Jesus' initial attitude to the woman?

5. Re-read verses 25-28. In these verses the woman engages Jesus directly, refusing to be silenced. She argues with Jesus. What is the reason Jesus gives for not healing her? What is her argument in response? How does Jesus then respond to her argument?
6. Matthew connects two healing stories, that of a Canaanite woman (21-28) and that of the crowds (29-31). Re-read verses 29-31. If we read these verses carefully, we see that many of those who were brought to Jesus for healing were not from the Jewish-Israelite community, for when they were healed "they glorified the God of Israel" (v 31). In what ways has this foreign woman enabled other foreigners to come to Jesus for healing? In what ways has this foreign woman persuaded Jesus that his ministry of healing is for everyone, not only the Jewish-Israelite community?
7. There are other similarities between the two healing stories. In both stories there are those who enable the healing of others. What is the role of those who facilitate the healing of others in these two stories?
8. Who are the "disciples" in our contexts who hinder the healing of those on the margins, particularly women, children, foreigners, and those living with disability?
9. Who are those on the margins of the available health care systems and health care resources in your context?
10. What arguments should the church be making in our contexts to ensure that the available health care is made accessible to all, particularly women, children, foreigners, and those living with disability?
11. Jesus acts to change the reality of the marginalized and discriminated. What actions should the church take in our contexts to ensure that the available health care is made accessible to all, particularly women, children, foreigners, and those living with disability? Be specific about what actions can be taken immediately and what actions could be taken with further planning.

The CBS has as its starting point social analysis (See) of the lived realities of women, children, foreigners, and those living with disability (Questions 8, 10, and 11) in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Australia. Participants from these contexts identified inequality in health care for these vulnerable groups. Question 2 allows those who participate in this CBS to bring their contexts to the text, doing their own seeing and connecting it with the biblical text. Questions 3-7 then slow down the re-reading process, enabling small groups to spend time re-reading the text, guided by each question, and then to report back to the whole group of participants. CBS is a "slow" reading process,²⁰ facilitating a close

20. John Riches, et al., *What Is Contextual Bible Study? A Practical Guide with Group Studies for Advent and Lent* (London: SPCK, 2010), 41.

Women have also taken the lead in HIV prevention and care. The Ujamaa Centre began working in the context of HIV and AIDS in the early 1990s, and, through our facilitation, a local community-based organization of women and a few men was formed.

and careful reading of the literary-narrative detail of the text. Questions 8-11 then move from a focus on the text to a focus on context, bringing the resources of the text into conversation with lived contexts of inequality. The agency of the Canaanite woman not only leads to wider circles of healing in Matthew's gospel, but also in contemporary contexts around the world wherever this CBS is done.

Women have also taken the lead in HIV prevention and care. The Ujamaa Centre began working in the context of HIV and AIDS in the early 1990s, and, through our facilitation, a local community-based organization of women and a few men was formed. They called themselves "Siyaphila" ("We are well, we are alive"). We worked with them regularly, doing CBS every second week, led by our colleague Bongzi Zengele. Siyaphila often chose their own biblical texts for CBS, among them two storm stories: Mark's story of Jesus asleep in the boat in the midst of a storm (Mark 4:35-6:1),²¹ and Matthew's story of Jesus walking on the water (Matt 14:22-33).²² Here is the Matthew CBS:

1. Listen to a dramatic reading of Matt 14:22-23. What is this text about?
2. What makes Peter get out of the boat?
3. Why is Peter able to walk in the midst of the storm?
4. What makes Peter begin to sink into the waves?
5. What prevents church leaders from getting out of the boat with Jesus in the midst of the HIV and AIDS storm?
6. Why do we need to get out of the boat to walk with Jesus in the midst of the HIV and AIDS storm?
7. What makes us sink into the waves when we try to walk with Jesus in the midst of the HIV and AIDS storm?

21. Ujamaa, "Redemptive Masculinity: A Series of Ujamaa Centre Contextual Bible Studies that Proclaim Life for Men and Women," (Ujamaa Centre, 2009), accessed September, 2019, http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/Manuals/Redemptive_masculinities_series_1.sflb.ashx; Gerald O. West and Bongzi Zengele, "Time for Jesus to Wake Up," in *Stilling the Storm: Contemporary Responses to Mark 4.35-5.1*, ed. John Vincent (Brandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2011).

22. Ujamaa, "Redemptive Masculinity: A Series of Ujamaa Centre Contextual Bible Studies that Proclaim Life for Men and Women."

8. What resources do we need to remain standing with Jesus in the midst of the HIV and AIDS storm?

This CBS is a good example of how we make use not only of literary-narrative analysis in our CBS questions but also of literary-semiotic analysis. Those living positively with HIV were clearly drawn to the storm image in the text, and it became a metaphor for their own lived reality.

The most significant CBS resources Matthew's gospel has offered us are in the area of masculinity. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is a different kind of man and that the community of male believers ought to be different kinds of men. In 2006 the Ujamaa Centre was invited by the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness/Action (Pacsa) and the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council (KZNCC) to facilitate a workshop on "Jesus the Man," as part of their "Men, Gender, and HIV/AIDS Project." I facilitated a CBS on Mark 5:22-43 and Bob Ekblad, who was visiting from a sister project in the USA,²³ facilitated a dialogical form of Bible study on Matt 20:17-34. Ekblad's unusual delimitation of the text enabled a dialogue to be established between the request of the two "sons of Zebedee" (20:20), made on their behalf by their mother, and the request of the "two blind men sitting by the roadside" on the outskirts of Jericho (20:29). I was amazed at the capacity of this Bible study to generate conversation about different masculinities. In response, and with Ekblad's affirmation, I constructed a CBS version of his dialogical Bible study:²⁴

1. Listen to a dramatic reading of this story. What is this text about?
2. What does the mother of Zebedee want from her sons?
3. How does Jesus respond to her request?
4. What do the two blind men want from Jesus?
5. How does Jesus respond to their request?
6. The story seems to contrast these two requests, revealing something about the two sets of men who make them. What kind of masculinity is evident in the request of the two disciples? What kind of masculinity is evident in the request of the two blind men?
7. Which of these kinds of masculinity are most common in your church and community?
8. What is the role of mothers in your church and community in shaping the masculinities of their sons?
9. What will you do to try and change the dominant masculinities in your church and community?

23. Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

24. Ujamaa, "Redemptive Masculinity: A Series of Ujamaa Centre Contextual Bible Studies that Proclaim Life for Men and Women." This version is slightly different. CBS are constantly being changed as we learn from doing them.

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This CBS follows the typical shape of a CBS, moving from initial community-based reception of the biblical text (Question 1), through a close and careful re-reading of the text (Questions 2-6), to a community-based appropriation of the text (Questions 7-9).

In their analysis of Matthew's representation of the masculinity of the Jesus movement, Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen Moore note that "the new possibilities that Matthew proclaims [for "Jewish" and "Gentile" identity] are inextricably bound up with new possibilities for masculinity."²⁵ Ekblad's Bible study on Matt 20:17-34 and our CBS version of it seemed to suggest that Matthew might be interrogating dominant notions of masculinity and patriarchy. As we read relevant biblical scholarship on Matthew and masculinity,²⁶ we came to see Matt 20:17-34 as a good example of Anderson and Moore's characterisation of Matthew's narrative construction as embodying "multiple, contradictory assumptions regarding masculinity."²⁷ Though Matthew uses the patriarchal categories of his time, Anderson and Moore argue that actual socio-cultural kinship relationships are subordinated to "spiritual or fictive kinship."²⁸ As Anderson and Moore go on to argue, "Literal kinship ties are portrayed as problematic, involving discord and rejection," but in contrast, the "spiritual kinship categories" of 'father,' 'brother,' and 'son,' as well as the relational categories of 'master/slave,' 'master/disciple,' and 'king/subject,' "define each other through their interrelationships – and redefine 'masculinity' in the process."²⁹ "The narrative identity narratively constructed for male disciples [and male readers] in Matthew," they continue, "amounts to an anomalous masculinity, when measured by traditional Greco-Roman standards."³⁰

25. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," in *New Testament Masculinities*, eds. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, vol. 45, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 75.

26. Anderson and Moore, eds., *New Testament Masculinities*, vol. 45, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

27. Anderson and Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," in *New Testament Masculinities*, 71.

28. Anderson and Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," in *New Testament Masculinities*, 75.

29. Anderson and Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," in *New Testament Masculinities*, 75-76.

30. Anderson and Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," in *New Testament Masculinities*, 76.

Our most recent work on Matthew's understanding of masculinity has been a CBS on the crucifixion of Jesus.³¹ Comparing Mark's account of the crucifixion with Matthew's made it clear that Matthew emphasized the bodily abuse that Jesus received. Matthew alters Mark in key respects: Matthew is explicit that Jesus is stripped four times (27:26, 28, 31, 35), emphasising the second stripping (27:29); Matthew is overt that Jesus is stripped of his robe/ cloak, making reference to the garment itself (27:28); Matthew is explicit that Jesus is taken into the praetorium, the site of soldiers (27:27); Matthew is explicit about the extent of the soldiers' humiliation of Jesus, elaborating in 27:29 on what Mark has in his version. Working with David Tombs, who has done pioneering work on Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse,³² the Ujamaa Centre has constructed a CBS on Matthew's text.³³ Having used this version with local community groups we have since revised the CBS as follows:

A Bible study on the crucifixion of Jesus

1. Listen to a "slow" reading of Matt 27:26-31 in a number of different translations and languages. What have you heard from this slow reading of a well-known story that disturbs you?
2. Who are the characters in this story, and what do we know about each of them?
3. What forms of violence are used against Jesus?
4. How many times is Jesus stripped? Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was stripped more than once. Re-read the text carefully and identify how many times Jesus is stripped.
5. Is stripping a form of violence? Why do the soldiers strip Jesus?
6. Matthew also makes it clear that Jesus was stripped in front of a whole "cohort" of about 500 soldiers. What other forms of sexual abuse might have taken place when so many men were involved in the repeated stripping and beating of Jesus?
7. In what situations in your context are men sexually abused by other men?
8. Are there resources in your community to address male sexual violence against men?

31. Gerald O. West, "Jesus, Joseph, and Tamar Stripped: Trans-Textual and Intertextual Resources for Engaging Sexual Violence against Men," in *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse*, eds. Jayme Reaves, David Tombs, and Rocío Figueroa Alvear (London: SCM Press, 2021), 118-123.

32. David Tombs, "Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse," in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 53 (1999); David Tombs, "Crucifixion and Sexual Abuse," in *When Did You See Me Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse*, eds. Jayme R. Reaves, David Tombs, and Rocío Figueroa (London: SCM Press, 2021).

33. West, "Jesus, Joseph, and Tamar Stripped: Trans-Textual and Intertextual Resources for Engaging Sexual Violence against Men," in *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse*, 122-123.

While many of the CBS participants have found it difficult to talk about violence against men and specifically sexual violence against men, gay men and trans-men have found this CBS empowering.

9. What can we do to address the issue of male sexual violence against men? Devise a specific "action plan" of an action that you can participate in.

This revised version gives the CBS a title, because those with whom we did the initial version felt that participants needed to be prepared for a Bible study on the crucifixion, given that, though this part of the gospel was referred to in the liturgy and in sermons, it was not a familiar Bible study text. Questions 3 and 5 have been added to prepare for reflection on different forms of violence within the text. Participants found the shift from Question 2 to Question 4 (which was Question 3 in the first version) too abrupt.

While many of the CBS participants have found it difficult to talk about violence against men and specifically sexual violence against men, gay men and trans-men have found this CBS empowering. Violence against the LGBTQIA+ community is endemic in our South African and African communities.³⁴ This CBS provides a safe and sacred scriptural site within which to grapple with the taboo subject of male sexual violence against men, as well as the taboo subject of queer masculinities.

Bread theology

While participants have found the Matthew 27 crucifixion CBS culturally, theologically, and ecclesiastically difficult, our economics-oriented CBS on the Lord's Prayer has been even more difficult for ordinary African Christian participants. The liturgical use of this prayer hampers the re-reading of this prayer in Matthew's gospel. Significantly, however, this biblical text was chosen by participants within a collaborative project in 2006, which brought together the Ujamaa Centre, the Church Land Programme, and a range of community-based organizations struggling with land issues.³⁵ Matt 6:9-13 was chosen for the CBS within this series

34. Gerald O. West, Charlene van der Walt, and Kapya J. Kaoma, "When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa" in *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2016).

35. Gerald O. West and Thulani Ndhlazi, "Leadership and Land: A Very Contextual Interpretation of Genesis 37-50 in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa," in *Genesis, Texts @ Contexts*, eds. Athalya Brenner, Archie Chi Chung Lee, and Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 175-181.

which focussed on “Land and Food Security.”³⁶ We have used Matthew’s version because it is probably an earlier version than Luke’s, retaining the features of Q,³⁷ bringing us closer to the early Jesus movement.

We have adapted this CBS a number of times, endeavoring to make it more accessible to church-based participants,³⁸ but here I include the initial version, honoring those who worked together to produce it:³⁹

1. What is this text about?
2. *Where* will God’s kingdom come?
3. How do verses 11 and 12 *describe* the kingdom of God?
4. Why is Jesus so concerned about “bread for today”?
5. Why is Jesus so concerned about “debt”?
6. Who in your context needs “bread for today”? Why?
7. Who in your context needs release from “debt”? Why?
8. What would the kingdom of God be like for these people?
9. What “temptations” and what “evil” will prevent us from establishing God’s kingdom on earth?
10. What will you do to ensure that God’s kingdom will come on earth? Write a list or plan of action of what you will do.

Central to this CBS is the socio-historical reality of indebtedness in the ancient world, whether the world of the Ancient Near East or Graeco-Roman Palestine.⁴⁰ Debt led eventually to the loss of ancestral land and so the need for daily bread. Jesus begins with the daily reality, but then turns attention (and prayer) to systemic change in order to bring about land restitution.⁴¹ Colonialism and apartheid in South Africa has forcibly removed Black South Africans from their land,⁴² which is why this biblical text resonated

36. Church Land Programme CLP, “Bible Study Series on Land,” 2006, accessed 3 June 2022, http://www.churchland.org.za/?page_id=98.

37. James M Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 206-211; see also Olli Hallikainen, “The Lord’s Prayer in the Sayings Gospel Q” (University of Helsinki, 2005).

38. Gerald O. West, “The Lord’s Prayer as Economic Renewal,” in *Global Perspectives on the Reformation: Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics*, eds. Anne Burkhardt and Simone Sinn (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017).

39. It would be useful to view this Bible study within the resource booklet that was produced to assist with facilitation; for both the English version and the isiZulu version see CLP, “Bible Study Series on Land.”

40. David Graeber, *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011); Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord’s Prayer: First-Century Debt and Jesus’ Intentions* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014).

41. West, “The Lord’s Prayer as Economic Renewal,” in *Global Perspectives on the Reformation: Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics*.

42. Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002); Leepo

Debt led eventually to the loss of ancestral land and so the need for daily bread. Jesus begins with the daily reality, but then turns attention (and prayer) to systemic change in order to bring about land restitution. Colonialism and apartheid in South Africa has forcibly removed Black South Africans from their land, which is why this biblical text resonated so clearly.

so clearly.

What the choice of this text in Matthew also alerted us to was how Matthew uses some of his sources, in this case Q, leaving Q largely unchanged but framing the source within his own theological frame. We find a similar case, again with an economic emphasis, in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matt 20:1-16. Our work on texts within Matthew’s gospel has enabled us to be overt about Itumeleng Mosala’s contention that “the texts of the Bible are sites of struggle,”⁴³ bearing within themselves divergent and even contending voices.⁴⁴ In the case of this parable told by Jesus, Matthew reframes the parable to fit his own ethno-religious theological argument concerning God’s inclusive “reordering” of “the structure of the old moral order in the new creation” in Christ.⁴⁵

In our CBS we attempt to disentangle the economically oriented parable Jesus told, in which the landowner is judged by the day-laborers of Jesus’ time, who have lost their land through indebtedness and now struggled to provide bread each day,⁴⁶ from Matthew’s theological redactional re-framing. Having discerned an original (to Jesus) economic parable within Matt 20:1-6, we have used socio-historical resources to bracket Matthew’s ethno-

Modise and Ndikho Mtshiselwa, “The Natives Land Act of 1913 Engineered the Poverty of Black South Africans: A Historico-Ecclesiastical Perspective,” in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39, no. 2 (2013).

43. Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 185.

44. Gerald O. West, “Scripture as a Site of Struggle: Literary and Socio-Historical Resources for Prophetic Theology in Post-Colonial, Post-Apartheid (Neo-Colonial?) South Africa,” in *Scripture and Resistance*, ed. Jione Havea (New York and London: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2019).

45. Herman C. Waetjen, *Matthew’s Theology of Fulfillment, Its Universality and Its Ethnicity: God’s New Israel as the Pioneer of God’s New Humanity* (London: Bloomsburg T&T Clark, 2017), 210.

46. William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 79-97.

religious frame (clearest in 20:16), offering the communities with whom we re-read this text two ways of interrogating the text, either as a parable of radical socialist-like inclusion (Matthew's orientation) or a parable critiquing the capitalist-like exploitative practices of land-owning elites.⁴⁷ Again, this is a CBS that we have revised a number of times. The version I include here is a good representation of how we offer unemployed youth in South Africa two quite different ways of reading this parable:

1. Listen to this familiar story. What is the text about?
2. Who are the characters in this text and what are their relationships to each other? Draw a picture of the relationships.

Input:

In the time of Jesus many peasant farmers had been forced off their land through the tributary mode of production, and its debt trap (see 1 Samuel 8). Those who lost their land became day-laborers.

There are two very different ways of reading this text:

- A. This text can be read as presenting the egalitarian vision of Jesus and the early Jesus movement (Acts 4:32-35). From this perspective, we might read the parable as a utopian vision of a society in which everyone receives the work and wage that they need for each day.
- B. This text can also be read as a critique by Jesus of exploitative practices of the landowners of his time, who hire when they like and pay what they like. From this perspective, the workers do not receive a just wage, they receive the exact exploitative daily rate, and no more. And when they argue they are ridiculed and rejected.

Group questions:

Group A

3. If the landowner represents the egalitarian socialist vision of Jesus and the kingdom of God, what is the relationship between the landowner and the workers in this text?
4. Under what conditions would this be a possible option in the South African context?

Group B

3. If the landowner represents the exploitative ruling elite in the first century, what is the relationship between the landowner and the workers in this text?
4. What aspects of this parable are relevant to the current

contexts of unemployment in South Africa?

[Report back from each group and discussion]

Common questions:

5. Which of these interpretations do you think is Matthew's?
6. What do each of these two different readings say to our context?
7. What actions will we take in response to these readings?

People's theology and public theology

Our understanding of CBS is that it enables organized communities of the poor and marginalized to draw resources from scripture with which to articulate and share their own local and lived theologies. CBS generates forms of people's theology, and people's theology, as the South African *Kairos Document* reminds us,⁴⁸ forms the basis of contextually relevant forms of prophetic theology.

As the above examples indicate, Matthew's gospel has provided plentiful resources for such local and lived theologies. A final example demonstrates how CBS resources may make their way from people's theology to public theology. In 2000, as we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Ujamaa Centre (then the Institute for the Study of the Bible), our colleague Sibusiso Gwala led the devotions one morning with a CBS on Matt 25:14-30, in which again we read against the grain of Matthew's redaction, working with William Herzog's analysis of this parable, recognizing in the original parable of Jesus "the vulnerability of the whistle-blower."⁴⁹ In the words of Gwala, summing up our CBS, "[t]his one man [the man with the one talent] in the text rebels against the system of the master." "Any system," he continues, "that allows someone to reap where he did not sow is evil. So, we need men and women who are going to rebel against the system and say, 'we are afraid.'"⁵⁰ Remarkably, this CBS resource made its way into the South African public realm.

In a speech to the International Labour Conference in 2003, Thabo Mbeki, the President of South Africa, engages in an extended way with "the Parable of the Talents in the Biblical Gospel according to St Matthew" (Matt 25:14-30). Mbeki follows Matthew's theological logic. However, some years later, on December 15, 2013, Bishop Ziphosihle D. Siwa, the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, preached on Matt 25:14-30 at the state funeral of Nelson Mandela. In his sermon Bishop Siwa follows the theological logic of Jesus, drawing

48. Theologians *Kairos*, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, Revised Second Edition ed. (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986), 34-35, footnote 15.

49. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, 150-168.

50. ISB, *The Tenth Anniversary Celebration and Evaluation* (Pietermaritzburg: Institute for the Study of the Bible and The House of Studies for Worker Ministry (The Worker Ministry Project), 2000), 11.

47. Gerald O. West, and Sithembiso Zwane, "Why Are You Sitting There?' Reading Matthew 20:1-16 in the Context of Casual Workers in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa," in *Matthew: Texts@ Contexts*, eds. Nicole Duran Wilkinson and James Grimshaw (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

on the kind of resources we offered in our CBS.⁵¹ People's theology has become prophetic public theology.

Conclusion

The Ujamaa Centre has journeyed with Matthew's gospel for more than thirty years, returning to it again and again for scriptural resources that potentially speak words of life into our South African contexts. Significantly, many of these Contextual Bible Studies speak to intersecting realities of South African life, for example, both culture and gender (Matt 1:1-18) and both economics and ecology (Matt 20:1-16). The Bible is an ambiguous sacred text in South Africa, having been used to give biblical-theological support to apartheid,⁵² but also as an ambiguous yet sacred "silo" or "weapon" for the struggle against apartheid and for the fullness of life.⁵³ The Ujamaa Centre stands in the biblical-theological tradition that affirms liberation, inclusion, and transformation, and Matthew's gospel has been our constant companion, both because of how the author preserves his source texts and because of his own theological orientation.

The Bible is an ambiguous sacred text in South Africa, having been used to give biblical-theological support to apartheid, but also as an ambiguous yet sacred "silo" or "weapon" for the struggle against apartheid and for the fullness of life.

51. For an analysis of these two different interpretations see Gerald O. West, "Public Realm Interpretations of a Parable (Matthew 25:14-30) by a Politician and a Priest, President Mbeki and Bishop Siwa," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 165 (2019).

52. Robert Vosloo, "The Bible and the Justification of Apartheid in Reformed Circles in the 1940s in South Africa: Some Historical, Hermeneutical and Theological Remarks," in *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015).

53. Takatso Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation," in *Journal of Black Theology* 2, 1 (1988).