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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENT MODES OF READING (THE BIBLE) AND THE ORDINARY READER

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Introduction

Something is missing in contextual biblical hermeneutics in South Africa. The voice(s) of 'the people' or what I have called 'the ordinary reader' is missing. However, the influence of reader-response criticism in biblical studies, the commitment to an option for the poor and oppressed in liberation hermeneutics, and the consensus in post-modernism that there is no epistemologically privileged position, variously remind us of the voice of the ordinary reader (West 1991a).

Fortunately, there has been some recognition of the need to hear the ordinary reader in the South African context (West 1991:161-180; Mosala 1989; Smit 1989; Draper and West 1989; and Lategan and Rousseau 1988). This paper continues with this work.

In this paper I am concerned with the interface between the trained reader and the ordinary reader. More specifically, I am concerned to explore the responses of ordinary readers to the different modes of reading emerging from biblical scholarship. In *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context* I began this exploration (West 1991); this paper continues the exploration.

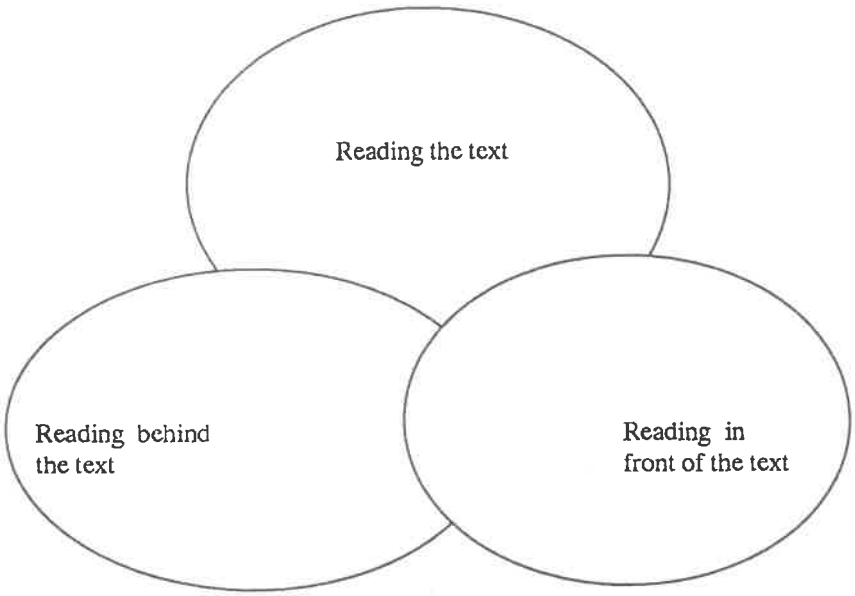
1. Delimiting the terms: 'modes of reading', 'the ordinary reader', and 'the relationship between'

Before I proceed with the exploratory research which forms the body of this paper, it is important to delimit exactly what I mean by the terms 'modes of reading', 'the ordinary reader', and 'the relationship between'.

1.1 Modes of reading

In some of my previous work I have suggested that it may be useful to consider the ways in which biblical scholars read the Bible under three overlap-

ping categories: reading behind the text, reading the text, and reading in front of the text (West 1991; West 1991b).



Three modes of reading

Briefly [1], 'reading behind the text' includes historical and sociological modes of reading. The focus here may be on historical and sociological reconstructions themselves (Meyers 1988), or on reading the text in the light of historical and sociological reconstructions (Sakenfeld 1989; Wittenberg 1991), or on particular historical and sociological methods of analysis (Mosala 1989; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; Gottwald 1979).

'Reading the text' includes literary, rhetorical, and structuralist modes of reading. The focus here may be on the surface structure of literary compositions (Trible 1978, 1979), or on the deep structures of the text (Jobling 1986a, 1986b), or on the narratological structure of the text (Bal 1986), or on the text as speech act (Lanser 1988).

'Reading in front of the text' includes thematic, symbolic, and metaphoric modes of reading. The focus here may be on the patterns, symbols, and themes of the biblical text (Ruether 1983), or on the semantic axes of the

1. My description of the three modes of reading is presented here in outline form. For a more detailed discussion see West 1991 and 1991b.

Bible (Croatto 1987), or on the world produced and projected by the text (Schneiders 1989). [2]

As the diagram above suggests, these modes of reading are not discreet, but overlap in a number of important ways. [3] Acknowledging this does not, however, detract from the usefulness of this analysis. As Jeffrey Stout and Stephen Fowl have argued, a careful analysis of interpretative interests can help us to recognise that our most intractable disagreements about textual meaning are often not really disagreements about the same thing. What we thought to be one topic is really several topics (Stout 1982; Fowl 1990; West 1991:104-107).

My analysis of the three modes of reading may also prove useful in exploring the relationship between trained readers of the Bible (biblical scholars and biblical studies) and ordinary readers of the Bible. It is to clarify the latter term that I now turn.

1.2 The ordinary reader

I use the term 'reader' in the phrase 'ordinary reader' to allude to the shift in hermeneutics towards the reader (Abrams 1958:8-29; Barton 1984:200 ff.; Lategan 1984:3-4; McKnight 1985:2-3; Eagleton 1989:119). However, my use of the term 'reader' is metaphoric in that it 'includes' the many who are illiterate, but who listen to, discuss, and retell the Bible.

The term 'ordinary' is used in a general and a specific sense. The general usuage includes all readers who read the Bible pre-critically. I also use the term 'ordinary' to designate a particular sector of pre-critical readers, those readers who are poor and oppressed (including, of course, women). In the latter sense the term 'ordinary' is similar to the terms 'the people' or 'the masses' as they are popularly used. Because I am working within a liberation paradigm, which has the poor and oppressed as its primary interlocutor, the particular usuage usually takes precedence over the general.

1.3 The relationship between

In some of my previous work I have explored aspects of the relation between these three modes of reading and the ordinary reader. For example, I have argued that there is no one mode of reading which has a privileged relationship to the context of struggle. Each of these modes of reading, whether focusing behind the text, or on the text, or in front of the text, offers a coherent and theoretically well-grounded hermeneutics of liberation. In other words, I have

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2. I have used the singular 'text' here because each of these interpreters could be said to read the Bible as a single text. For a detailed justification of this, see Croatto 1987:56-60 (and West 1991:124-139).

3. This particular diagram is also useful in that, when read from left to right, it represents something of a historical perspective on the development of interpretive interests (Abrams 1958, Barton 1984, Lategan 1984, McKnight 1985, Eagleton 1989).

shown that 'literary' and 'symbolic/metaphoric/thematic' readings can meet the critique and challenges posed by 'socio-scientific' readings (West 1991:141, 1990). [4]

Drawing on four case studies of ordinary readers reading the Bible (West 1991:142-173), I also demonstrate that there is no 'typical' ordinary reader and that while there may appear to be some affinities between 'the ordinary reader' and the three modes of reading, the situation is more complex. A crucial point that is made here is how different the ordinary reader's mode of reading is from that of the trained reader. While there are certainly interesting similarities, we must recognize that something fundamentally different is going on in the modes of reading of the ordinary reader. The majority of ordinary readers read the Bible pre-critically. If 'pre-critical' is understood as it is usually used in biblical studies, then ordinary readers have little choice in how they read the Bible. They read it pre-critically because they have not been trained in critical modes of reading. In other words, although there are important similarities between the modes of reading of ordinary readers and the modes of reading of 'expert' readers, there is nevertheless this crucial difference, namely, that ordinary readers read the Bible pre-critically, while the three modes I have outlined are all critical (or post-critical) readings of the Bible (West 1991:139-141).

The implications of this point are important. For example, Itumeleng Mosala argues that black interpreters like Allan Boesak and others 'have been surpassed by the largely illiterate black working class and poor peasantry who have defied the canon of Scripture, with its ruling class ideological basis, by appropriating the Bible in their own way using the cultural tools emerging out of their struggle for survival' (Mosala 1986:184). [5] However, while there is definitely a 'critical consciousness' on the part of 'some' ordinary readers, this is not quite the same as the sort of historical-sociological critical approach advocated by Mosala, Norman Gottwald, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The ordinary reader may be 'politicized' or 'conscientized' and so have a general critical consciousness towards society and texts, but they do not have the historical and sociological tools to be critical of the biblical text in the same way as Mosala, Gottwald, and Schüssler Fiorenza. When young workers in Young Christian Workers (YCW) appropriate the Bible as the story of liberation they are doing so on the basis of selected texts (and not various redactional layers) and of selected historical and sociological information (and not a systematic reconstruction of the social system behind the text) (West 1991:152-157). The critical consciousness of some ordinary read-

4. This demonstration is important. The danger is that the socio-scientific modes of reading may slide into a form of scientism. There are hints of this danger in the work of Itumeleng Mosala, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Norman Gottwald. For example, Mosala states that 'If black theology is to become an effective weapon in the struggle to critique and transform present realities, it needs to employ analytical concepts that can get to the bottom of *real* events, relationships, structures, and so forth' (Mosala 1989:4; my emphasis, GW).

5. For similar comments, see Mofokeng 1988:40-41.

ers may predispose them to a critical approach to the Bible, but as ordinary readers they are not there yet.

Similarly, Severino Croatto seems to argue that the poor and oppressed actually read the Bible in the way that his in front of the text mode of reading articulates. But once again it is important to recognize that while many ordinary readers do read the Bible thematically in its final form as a single canonical text, this is not quite the same as the linguistic-symbolic post-critical canonical approach of Croatto (or the similar approaches of Ruether and Schneiders). When the ordinary reader reads the Bible thematically in its final form they begin with creation (and not exodus) and read selectively (and not along a semantic axis). So while the ordinary reader may be predisposed to such a post-critical in front of the text reading of the Bible, they are not there yet.

Within contextual hermeneutics it is crucial that we recognize both the difference and the complexity of the readings of ordinary readers. If the crux of liberation hermeneutics, the epistemological privilege of the poor and the oppressed (Frostin 1988:6-7; West 1991:63-79), is really going to shape our readings of the Bible then we have to recognize these factors. Once we admit the poor and the oppressed, ordinary readers, into the debate things will never be quite the same.

Methodological analysis and clarification among trained readers is not sufficient, particularly among those committed to reading the Bible in contexts of liberation. Such contexts demand that ordinary readers join this discussion. As I have argued before (West 1991:163), a first step in this direction requires a willingness to discover who the ordinary readers are and how they are reading the Bible. A second step in this direction requires that we honestly analyze the relationship between the trained reader and the ordinary reader in liberation hermeneutics.

It is the second of these steps that is the concern of this paper. Fortunately, reader research in the South African context is doing research in the area of the first step. However, research on the interface between trained readings and ordinary readings is not that developed. The Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) in Pietermaritzburg, and others, are doing some work in this area (West 1991a; West and Draper 1991). This paper focuses on one aspect of this work, the relationship between the three modes of reading and the ordinary reader.

2. Workshop research on contextual Bible study: exploring how ordinary readers respond to the three modes of reading

2.1 Research methodology

In doing research into the question of how ordinary readers respond to the three modes of reading, I used a 'participatory research' or 'action research' methodology. Briefly, in accordance with this methodology, the research

emerged from the needs and experience of communities of the poor and oppressed; the research recognised that it was not value-neutral; the research used the interpretative categories of the participants as a basis for the discourse from within which the participants developed their own theorising; the research provided a means by which distorted self understandings of the participants might be overcome by analysing the social and religious forces that shape these understandings; the research linked theory to practice (action to reflection) reflexively offering transformative strategies which might overcome institutional and societal obstacles to democratic and free practices; and the research was motivated by an emancipatory concern where the process is just as important as the product (Luckett 1990). While the core of the research was conducted within a participatory research model, there were aspects of the research process which were not, as my comments below indicate.

2.2 An outline of the workshop research

The research was conducted during six workshops. Two of these workshops were held at the Federal Theological Seminary, Pietermaritzburg, one in 1990 and one in 1991, and included first year seminary students, 95% of whom were black. [6] As the workshops took place early in the year, these students had not had very much biblical training. Another workshop was incorporated into a course in the Department of Theological Studies, the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in 1990, and included Honours and Masters students, 60% of whom were black. Most of these students had had considerable theological training and some biblical training. Another workshop took place at the Anglican Students Federation Conference in 1991, and included a broad range of tertiary level students, 75% of whom were black. Some of these students had had some theological and biblical training, but the majority were students of other disciplines. The last workshop was the Theological Exchange Programme National Workshop in 1991, which included ministers, facilitators, activists, and students, 85% of whom were black. Most of those attending the workshop did not have any formal biblical and theological training.

All of the workshops brought together people from all over South Africa. In each workshop women were present, but formed a small minority.

There was considerable continuity between workshops in that my own input and presentation had been shaped extensively by the previous workshop(s). In addition, I would also share the contributions of previous workshops with subsequent workshops. This enabled a form of dialogue to develop between successive workshops.

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6. I am using the term 'black' as a positive description that defines people in their own terms. While I look forward to the time in our South African context when such terms are no longer necessary, that time has yet to come.

A workshop format was used because it allowed for a participatory research approach. In each workshop a similar procedure was followed. We began with the experience of participants by considering what participants understood by contextual Bible study. Discussion and debate produced, in each case, a similar framework of commitments which constituted our understanding of contextual Bible study. [7]

Having analysed our experience and understanding of contextual Bible study, we then divided into smaller groups (of between 5-12 people) to do Bible study. In each of the workshops we used the same three Bible studies (see Appendix). However, there was not always time for this, so in many cases a group was only able to do one Bible study in detail.

It is important to note that in all workshops, except the University one, the Bible studies were done as Bible studies or as training in methods of Bible study, and not as a research exercise. The focus, however, was on the way in which the Bible was read (the mode of reading) in each Bible study.

The task given to participants in each case was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each mode of reading the Bible 'for their community' (which was for the majority of participants a community of the poor and oppressed). Here, and in the discussion that followed, participants were encouraged to use their own categories of analysis.

After the smaller groups had reported back and debated in plenary, the strengths and weaknesses for each mode of reading were summarised.

I then gave an interactive input (in which I guided the discussion of the participants) on each of the modes of reading. The purpose of this process was to enable participants to understand, articulate, and use each of the three modes of reading. It was at this stage in the process that I introduced some of my own categories of analysis.

Finally, we discussed in plenary whatever questions and concerns were generated by the process.

3. Preliminary findings

The findings outlined and discussed below are preliminary in that the participatory model used requires consultation with and accountability to the participants at every level of the (research) process. This paper is in some respects a product of such consultation and accountability, but represents in this form largely my own reflections and formulations. This paper is not the goal of the research, the goal of the research is community transformation.

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7. I use the pronoun 'our' here because I too was a participant in this process. See the final section of the paper for further discussion on this aspect of the research.

3.1 Four commitments of contextual Bible study

Participants agreed that there were at least the following four commitments in a contextual Bible study methodology:

3.1.1 A commitment to begin with reality as perceived by the (organised) poor and oppressed

This commitment arises from the very real commitment of most of the participants to an option for the poor and oppressed; beginning with their view of reality, their experiences, their needs, and their questions. The use of 'organised' to qualify 'poor and oppressed' was a useful qualification for some participants because it reflected a concern for a critical, not a colonised, view of their reality. Other participants argued, however, that such a distinction was problematic because it discriminated against the perspectives and categories of analysis of the unorganised poor and oppressed.

3.1.2 A commitment to read the Bible in community

This commitment stressed three aspects of 'community consciousness'. First, there was the importance of a communal reading of the Bible in which the contributions of both trained and ordinary readers are equally important. Participants agreed that although the contributions of trained and ordinary readers are certainly different, both are significant. Second, a commitment to corporate readings of the Bible not only empowers ordinary readers, it also develops processes which facilitate the accountability of biblical studies and theological education to ordinary people. A third important element of community consciousness is the faith of the community. Participants affirmed reading the Bible within the community of faith.

3.1.3 A commitment to read the Bible critically

This commitment was not initially articulated by the participants, but through a process of reflection on and analysis of the reading practices in their own contexts, most participants recognised the need for critical tools and categories, not only in social analysis, but also in reading the Bible. Participants realised that it was only by appropriating and developing critical modes of reading that many ordinary readers would move beyond a 'fundamentalism of the left' (Assmann 1976:104). Participants came to recognise that critical consciousness was just as important as community consciousness.

3.1.4 A commitment to individual and social transformation through Bible study

This fourth commitment is not merely a slogan but a real commitment to work for social transformation within those communities in South Africa where the Bible is a significant text. Participants saw the contextual Bible

study process as potentially transformative in a number of ways. Contextual Bible study could play an important role in breaking the 'culture of silence' (Freire) of the poor and oppressed, by enabling them to see reality from the perspective of God's project of liberation, and to see themselves as active subjects and co-workers in God's project of liberation. Participants agreed that contextual Bible study is also potentially transformative in that it gives the poor and oppressed analytical tools and so plays a role in developing their critical consciousness.

3.2 Contextual Bible study and the hermeneutic cycle/spiral

Most participants were familiar with doing contextual Bible study within a See-Judge-Act framework, which can be represented as a hermeneutic cycle or spiral.

The hermeneutic cycle or spiral

Participants agreed that the starting point was a matter of strategy, and that in some communities the cycle should begin with the text, and in others with the context. The starting point, therefore, was determined by taking into account the context and experiences of the readers.

3.3 Modes of reading and the ordinary reader

Having begun with the experience of the participants, the workshop moved into a more critical phase with reflection on the three modes of reading the Bible exemplified in the three Bible studies (see Appendix). By doing one or more Bible studies and by reflecting on each study's mode of reading the bib-

lical text, participants were able to debate the strengths and weaknesses of each for their respective communities.

It was necessary during the group discussion and plenary report back to make it clear that the focus of the participants should be on the way in which the Bible was read in each Bible study, and not on way in which the Bible study was constructed as whole.

The responses of the participants to the three modes of reading were made from the perspective of their role as facilitators in communities of the poor and oppressed. In the sections that follow I have collated and summarised their responses.

3.3.1 Reading behind the text

Strengths

Participants felt that an important strength of this mode of reading the Bible in their communities would be that it situated the text in a real life context. This would affirm and develop the community's understanding that God was at work in history and society.

A closely related strength was that the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions of a text became apparent through such a mode of reading. Participants felt that this would help their communities to recognise that God was at work in these dimensions of their lives.

Another strength was that such an approach would minimise the 'abuse' of the text. It was felt that some knowledge of the historical and sociological context of the text would empower the communities not only to interpret the text against this backgound themselves, but also to identify when others misused the text against them.

A strength of reading behind the text was that it would transfer critical tools and categories to ordinary readers, and so develop their critical consciousness, expanding their historical and sociological analyses of both the text and their context.

Weaknesses

The major weakness of this mode of reading was that it would require training and resources not available to most facilitators and their communities. Participants felt that there was therefore a danger that the community would become dependent on and/or manipulated by outside 'expert' input.

Even if training and resources were available, there was still a weakness in the approach because facilitators and their communities would have no role in the production of this knowledge.

Participants also felt that a behind the text mode of reading would sometimes create too much of a gap between the past and the present (the 'then' and the

'now'). In addition, the background information was often conflicting and might result in confusion and inaction on the part of ordinary readers.

A related weakness of this mode of reading was that by focusing behind the text there would be a 'delay' in the community's appropriation of the text for the present.

3.3.2 Reading the text

Strengths

The major strength of this mode of reading was that it would start with the text as ordinary people knew it, and would read the text as it is, which is the way in which most ordinary readers read the text.

Another strength of this mode of reading was that it would encourage ordinary readers to interpret the text as a whole, and not in a selective manner. In this respect a focus on the text itself would also contribute to the development of critical consciousness. In other words, participants felt that by taking the linguistic context of the text seriously, their communities would be able to identify and challenge selective uses of the Bible among themselves and by others.

Some participants identified another strength in reading the biblical text as text, namely, that the Bible might be read not only as history but also as story.

Weaknesses

A weakness of reading the text was that most ordinary readers would find it very difficult to read the text carefully and closely. Such an approach would, therefore, require some training. (Similar concerns as expressed above about the role of outside experts were also raised here.)

An obvious weakness of this mode of reading was that it would require a high level of literacy in the community.

Although appropriation to the present was more immediate here than in the above mode, participants felt that there might still be a problem in engaging their communities through the relevance of the text to their contexts.

3.3.3 Reading in front of the text

Strengths

Participants felt that the major strength of this mode of reading was that it would allow their communities to read the text from their understandings of its dominant themes. This approach, in other words, maximised the participation of the community.

A related strength of this approach was that it would allow for an easy movement from text to context, that appropriation was more immediate than in the other two modes of reading.

Another strength of the in front of the text mode of reading was that it would be the mode of reading closest to the way in which ordinary readers usually read the Bible.

Weaknesses

Participants felt that a real weakness of this mode of reading was that it would do little to develop new ways of reading the Bible or critical consciousness.

A related weakness was that this approach might only be used on isolated texts, and so would not challenge the spiritual and moralistic themes of many ordinary readers. In other words, participants felt that unless their communities read the biblical text as a whole (and/or in historical and sociological context), the dominant theme of liberation would not necessary emerge from this mode of reading. [8]

3.4 Doing contextual Bible study in the community: some general comments

After the group report-back I gave an interactive input on the three modes of reading, in which I addressed the questions and concerns of participants through a brief analysis of the three modes of reading and the way in which each mode of reading enabled the Bible to 'speak' to the present. (I saw this aspect of the participatory research process as the point at which I could most usefully make my contribution. My assumption is that having some understanding of and access to different modes of reading the Bible might be useful to facilitators in their communities. Whether this proves to be so is part of the ongoing research process.) I then made some general comments on doing contextual Bible study. These comments have been extensively shaped by successive workshops and so represent not only my reflections, but also the reflections of many participants.

3.4.1 The different ways of reading the Bible in the contextual Bible process do overlap and can be used together

Participants agreed that the three modes of reading did overlap in some respects. The intersecting venn diagram model of the three modes of reading used above emerged from such observations, and replaced the more linear model I had been using (which was an adaption of Lategan 1984:3). Participants also agreed that aspects of the three modes of reading could be used to-

8. The majority of participants assumed that liberation was a dominant theme in the Bible. This assumption has, of course, been questioned, particularly by women (Sakenfeld 1989; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; West 1991a).

gether. A few participants recognised that there are some basic incompatibilities between the different modes of reading. [9]

3.4.2 There is no 'best' way of reading the Bible in the contextual Bible study process, only 'different' ways of reading the Bible

Although each participant might have favoured a particular mode of reading over the others, there was general agreement that each mode of reading had its advantages and disadvantages when it come to reading the Bible in their communities.

3.4.3 The particular mode of reading used should be shaped by the text being studied, the kind of community reading the Bible, and the objectives of the Bible study

Discussion on this point emerged from the discussion of the previous point. Participants agreed that certain texts lend themselves to a behind the text mode of reading, while others are more clearly understood by reading in front of the text. Similarly, participants felt that different communities would find particular modes of reading more useful than others. Participants also agreed that the objectives of a Bible study should shape the mode of reading chosen.

3.4.4 With each of these modes of reading the facilitator should find creative ways of analysing the South African context and relating the Bible to this context

A fundamental concern of all participants was, as I have already stated, the transformation of the South African context. Although the focus of these workshops had been on Bible study and biblical training, there was an ever present concern for social analysis of the South African context.

3.5 Commentary and conclusions

The findings of this research cannot be formulated and quantified in a precise way. This participatory research is an ongoing process through which we are learning all the time, so these findings are preliminary. Not only are we learning about how ordinary readers read the Bible, or how ordinary readers relate to different modes of reading, [10] we are also learning to ask new questions.

For example, this participatory research process, in conjunction with recent events in South Africa and elsewhere, has raised a crucial question. This is

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9. That only a few recognised this is not surprising. Most participants were concerned about the practical uses and effects of these modes of reading, and so did not analyse the modes of reading theoretically.

10. The ISB has a number of projects which are continuing to do research in these areas.

the question of what categories of analysis we use in reading the biblical text and our context. Until recently there has been consensus on the answer to this question (at least in 'progressive' circles). The categories we ought to use are those of the social sciences, particularly the categories derived from the sociology of knowledge and Marxist analysis (Frostin 1988:9-10). Now there is no doubt that these 'Western' sources have much to contribute to our analysis of the South African context. However, the crisis in 'the north' and the empowerment of the Third World have contributed to the growing acknowledgement of the the need to identify, recover, and use categories of analysis from our own African context.

If we are to take seriously our commitment to the epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed, and our commitment to reading the Bible 'from below', then we also need to take seriously the categories of analysis which are used by these communities. [11]

The tension which emerges as soon as one says this, a tension which is present in the research outlined above and in the participatory research method itself, is the tension between a colonised consciousness and a critical consciousness. On the one hand there is the recognition of what centuries of colonisation has done to the consciousness of the poor and oppressed (Memmi 1965; West 1991:164-173). On the other hand, there is a growing recognition that the poor and oppressed do have critical consciousness, albeit in forms different from those with which we are familiar (Frostin 1988:97-100; Segundo 1985; Oduyoye 1989; Makhetha 1989; Ntreh 1990; Vandana 1991; Lee 1991; An Asian Group Work 1991; Kalilombe 1991; A Nicaraguan Example 1991; An Indonesian Example 1991; A South African Example 1991; Sugirtharajah 1991).

The tension probably cannot be resolved (Segundo 1985). But we can continue to work creatively within this tension, and we can come to understand its parameters more clearly. We can only do this, however, when we move beyond 'speaking for' the poor and oppressed, and beyond 'listening to' the poor and oppressed, towards 'speaking to' the poor and oppressed (Spivak 1988; Arnott 1991).

'Listening to' presupposes the speaking voice of a wholly self-knowing subject free from ideology, while 'speaking for' denies the subject status of the poor and oppressed altogether (Arnott 1991:13-14). In other words, the danger of 'listening to' is that we romanticise and idealise the contribution of the poor, while the danger of 'speaking for' is that we minimise and rationalise the contribution of the poor.

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11. The 'we' here and in the following paragraphs includes the facilitators who are from among the poor and oppressed, but who form a 'middle' class of intellectuals, and people like myself who are from the ruling classes.

Jill Arnott argues that Gayatri Spivak uses the phrase 'speaking to' not simply to make the 'obvious point that the feminist intellectual should consult the women she is researching and invite their participation', rather,

> ... she is pointing to the need to occupy the dialectical space between two subject-positions, without ever allowing either to become transparent. By remaining constantly alert to, and interrogative of, her own positionality and that of her subject, and ensuring that the mediating process of representation remains visible, the feminist researcher may succeed in enabling a dialogue in which the 'testimony of the [subaltern] woman's voice-consciousness' can be heard. As Spivak acknowledges, 'such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or "fully" subjective', but it would not be misrecognised as such, and it would, at least, be heard (Arnott 1991:14). [12]

In other words, Arnott and Spivak are arguing that 'speaking to' takes seriously the subjectivity of both the trained reader and the ordinary reader, and all that this entails for their respective categories and contributions.

However, the power relations in the interface between the ordinary reader and the trained reader cannot be obliterated, and they must not be ignored. They must be foregrounded.

> Elite researchers, black and white, need to be acutely aware of this problem. But if difference can also be used creatively, to power a genuinely dialectical interaction between two vigilantly foregrounded subject-positions, perhaps more progress can be made towards understanding and changing the situation of all South African women (Arnott 1991:17).

The (post-modern) perspective of Spivak and Arnott provides us with, I would suggest, a useful theoretical and strategic framework for continuing our work in the interface between ordinary and trained readers of the Bible. Provided the unequal power relations between ordinary and trained readers are acknowledged and foregrounded, provided the trained reader is willing to learn 'from below', and provided the poor and oppressed continue to empower and be empowered, [13] there is hope for something truly transformative emerging from the interface between trained and ordinary readers of the Bible.

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12. Arnott is here quoting Spivak 1988:297.

13. I do not think that Spivak and Arnott take full cognisance of the practical effects of power inequalities. The only real guarantee of a genuine 'speaking to' is the empowerment of the poor and oppressed. The changes taking place in South Africa are no reason for making empowerment of the poor and oppressed any less important. In fact, if we are to learn anything from the experience of the Philippines, the empowering of the base is even more important than ever before.

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Appendix

Three modes of reading the Bible in Contextual Bible studies

☞ Read: Ex 2:1-10.

☞ Discussion:

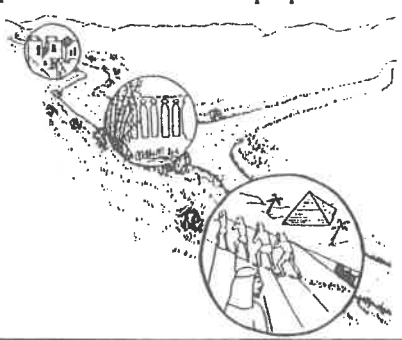
This story tells us of the birth and childhood of Moses. The Egyptian daughter of Pharoah found Moses. What shows us that Moses was not a throw-away child?

The boy's sister was quick to enough call the mother and Pharoah's daughter asked her to be the boy's wet nurse, that is to breast-feed him for her. Her joy must have been great: the baby was safe from the Egyptian death squads and could even stay with his family.

How would the Hebrews answer this question:

Whose hand is at work in saving this child from death?

After the child had been brought to the palace there was more news: Pharoah's daughter had adopted him as her own son. He was to become an out-and-out Egyptian. However, we know that in the end he did not become one of the oppressors. He sided with his people.



☞ Input:

This is the story of Moses. We have a similar story about a king called Sargon. He wrote a praise-song about the family from which he came, about his upbringing and about how he came to power. This song is very old and has recently been found and translated.

Read the story that the song tells, thinking about what is similar to Moses' story and what is different.

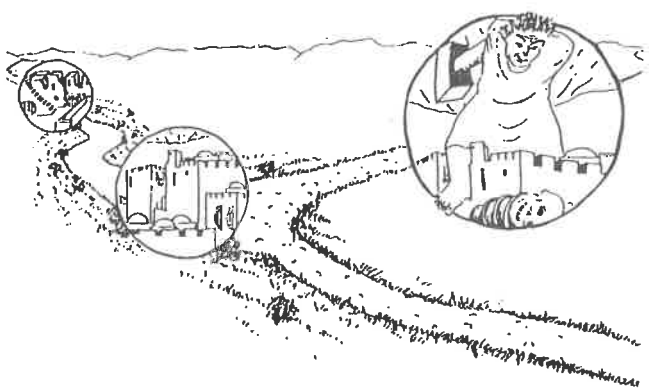
☞ The Legend of Sargon

I am now the powerful king of Agade, and how I came to be king is a strange story. My mother was an unfaithful wife, and I do not know who my father is. My mother kept it a secret that she had given birth to a boy. She placed me in a basket that she had made water-proof and put it out to float on the river that flowed past the city. Here a man called Akki found the basket when he was drawing water. He lifted me out and brought me up as his son. He made me his gardener, but soon the goddess Ishtar fell in love with me. That set me on the road to become king, and to stay king.

I was a powerful ruler over the black-headed people, I made them obey me. I did not only rule over people; I also became lord over land, and conquered difficult mountain ranges because I had tools made out of that new stuff they call bronze. Let the man that aims at becoming king after me beat that! Besides, I succeeded to sail around in the waters of those powerful sea nations that everyone is so scared of. And not only once; three times! I challenge anyone wanting to become the next king to do the same!

☞ Discuss:

- ✘ In which ways are the stories of Moses and Sargon similar?
- ✘ In which ways are the stories of Moses and Sargon different?
- ✘ Do you find anything in the Moses story amazing?



☞ Input:

The Israelite people who heard the story of Moses probably also knew the story of Sargon. This is because Sargon was the founder of a powerful nation in their part of the world, the Assyrians.

When the story of Moses was written down, the Egyptian oppression of the Hebrews had been ended long ago. Now it was the Assayrians who were oppressing the Israelites. The Assyrians had conquered the land of the Israelites, put their own puppet on the throne of Juda; huge sums of money had to be paid to the Assyrian state, and worship of Yahweh (Jehovah) had been forbidden.

That was the situation when the story of Moses was written down.

We can be sure that the story of the Hebrews under Egypt reminded the Hebrew readers of their own present situation under the Assyrians. Surely they were praying for another Moses, through whom God would liberate them from the Assyrians. What will we think of when we read this story in our own situation today?

☞ Task:

Together think out or write a short story of Moses' life as if it had happened in our country today.

Reading the text

BIBLE STUDY ON MARK 10:17-22

0. General questions.

(a) What do you think this story meant in the time of Jesus?
(b) What do you think this story means for us today?

The following questions may help you to answer these two general questions:

1. The wealthy man.

(a) What do we know about this man who spoke to Jesus?
(b) What do you think he did for a living?
(c) Why do you think he owned many possessions?
(d) Why do you think he spoke to Jesus?

2. The commandments.

(a) Why do you think Jesus talked about the commandments?
(b) Why do you think Jesus used these particular commandments?
(c) What do you think the commandments that Jesus used have in common?
(d) Why do you think keeping these commandments was not enough to gain eternal life?
(e) Which do you think is more important to Jesus, to keep the commandments or to give to the poor?

3. The challenge.

(a) Why do you think Jesus told the man to sell his possessions and give to the poor?
(b) Why do you think Jesus told the man to do this before he could follow him?
(c) Why do you think the young man did not obey Jesus?
(d) What do you think Jesus meant by "treasure in heaven"?

4. The poor

(a) Who do you think Jesus meant by "the poor" in this story?
(b) Why do you think they were poor?

5. Today.

(a) Does this story say anything to us today?
(b) Who do you think are similar to the wealthy man today?
(c) Why do you think they are wealthy?
(d) Who do you think are the poor today?
(e) Why do you think they are poor?
(f) What do you think Jesus' challenge means to us?

Reading in front of the text

Bible Study 3 on Matthew 5-9

1. Welcome.
2. Hymn and prayer.
3. Sharing thoughts on the picture:
   - What do we see in the picture?
   - What's wrong with the man'eyes?
   - What are our eyes like?
4. Reading: Matthew 6:19-34.
5. Invitation to retell the text in one's own words.
6. Discussion on the text:
   -What does the text say about wealth?
   -How can wealth cloud our vision?
   -How does Jesus want people to live?
   -How can we try to live like that in our world today?
7. Hymn and prayer.