Scriptura 124 (2025:1), pp. 1–18 http://scriptura.journals.ac.za
ISSN 2305-445X (online), 0254-1807 (print)
http://dx.doi.org/10.7833/124-1-2266

Biblical Hermeneutics as a Site of Struggle: South African Sites of Contestation in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s

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Abstract

'Hermeneutics', or the theory of the interpretation of texts, was a substantive component of much biblical scholarship in the 1980 and 1990s. Many articles or essays would begin with a definition of 'hermeneutics'. Few, however, would be explicit about their own 'theory of the interpretation of texts', preferring to define 'hermeneutics' and then continue as if their own theory of the interpretation of texts was self-evident. Significantly, South African Black Theology, particularly in its second phase (in the late 1980s), was explicit about its theory of the interpretation of text. Situating itself within this trajectory, the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research has attempted to be explicit about its hermeneutics since its inception in the late 1980s. This article locates the hermeneutic trajectory of the Ujamaa Centre within the formative hermeneutic debates in the late 1980s and early 1990s, drawing on the work of South Africans like Welile Mazamisa (whose work I along with other colleagues celebrate; see 2025-HTS: Honouring Prof Welile Mazamisa: The Reader, the Text, and Two Horizons), Bernard Lategan, Gunther Wittenberg, Jonathan Draper, Itumeleng Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng, and others. The Ujamaa Centre was fortunate at the time, in the early 1990s, in having the inclusive space of Bernard Lategan's yearly Consultation on Contextual Hermeneutics, facilitated by the Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics at Stellenbosch University, as well as the inclusive publication practice of the journal Scriptura, which published the work of this Consultation and related biblical hermeneutic work. This yearly workshop identified biblical (and theological) hermeneutics as its core focus. My article tracks these formative conversations, reflecting on how this yearly workshop and Scriptura provided the safe space to be overt about the Ujamaa Centre's emerging theory of the interpretation of texts.

Keywords: Contextual Biblical Interpretation; Ujamaa Centre; Centre for Contextual Theology; Scriptura; Site of Struggle; Hermeneutics

Introduction

In reflecting on the hermeneutical history of the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, University of KwaZulu-Natal, we have emphasised the pivotal roles of South African Black Theology and South African Contextual Theology and the liberation theology trajectories in which they participate (West 2022a: 2024). In

this article, I reflect on another dialogue partner in the formation of the Ujamaa Centre's 'Contextual Bible Study' hermeneutical formation, remembering with gratitude the colleagues who gathered around the table at Stellenbosch University, in a circle, as part of the yearly "Consultation on Contextual Hermeneutics" of the Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics led by Bernard Lategan.

However – and here I take up an autobiographical biblical critical tone (Staley 2002; Schutte 2005) – my own explicitly biblical hermeneutic journey began earlier, when as a pastor in a Pentecostal church and a part-time lecturer in Linguistics at Rhodes University, Makhanda (then Grahamstown), I was grappling with the linguistic dimensions of Pentecostalism's theological understanding of 'powerful words', whether in the Bible or in Pentecostal worship. My view was that our church presumed too much and claimed too much with respect to the power of words. In grappling with this problem, I read with considerable relief Anthony Thiselton's "The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings" (Thiselton 1974). I immediately wrote a letter to Thiselton, probing further, which began a correspondence and led, some years later, to my postgraduate studies at Sheffield University in 1985.

By this time, my Pentecostal church and I had parted ways, in 1983, both because of my different theological orientation and my political activism. Rhodes University immediately offered me a full-time position in the Linguistics Department, where I had completed an Honours degree. Through our correspondence, Thiselton had encouraged me to come to Sheffield to complete my Masters' degree in biblical studies. I was attempting to gather financial resources for this when the State of Emergency was declared. The apartheid state was rounding up and detaining activists of all kinds in the Eastern Cape, and comrades advised me to go immediately. I left South Africa rather abruptly, shortly after a partial State of Emergency was declared in the Eastern Cape (and a few other areas) in June 1985. I was active at the time in the National Union of South African Students' (NUSAS) anti-apartheid educational work with Black students who had been expelled from Bantu Education schools prior to and in the wake of the 1976 student uprising and the death of Steve Biko in 1977 (where I met McGlory Speckman, a young Black activist, who later became a colleague in the Ujamaa Centre and a New Testament scholar (see for example Speckman 2016)). I was also active in anti-(White military)-conscription projects, including the Grahamstown Advice Centre on National Service /Conscription (GRACONS) (1977) and the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) (1983). The South African Bureau for State Security (BOSS) used the State of Emergency in the Eastern Cape to intensify its work of surveillance, intimidation, detention, and death. Those of us involved in anti-apartheid work of various kinds were targeted.

My sojourn in England among Black South African exiles proved transformative, as I explain in the next section, forging my partially reconstituted White South African hermeneutical social location.

Being partially re-constituted

Anti-apartheid organisations in the United Kingdom welcomed me, especially the African Education Trust, and I managed to secure sufficient funds to register for a Masters' degree in biblical studies at Sheffield University, England, in 1985, where my biblical hermeneutics was formed by the praxis of the Urban Theology Unit (Vincent

1994) and the philosophical and linguistic analysis of Anthony Thiselton (Thiselton 1974, 1980; Thiselton 1992).

Among others who welcomed me in the UK was Barney Pityana. Pityana, before he went on to be the Director of the Programme to Combat Racism at the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1988, was then a parish priest based in Birmingham, where he gathered those of us who were South African exiles of various kinds. This was a formative experience for me as a White South African, being re-schooled by comrades in the various liberation movements in exile within the safe and sacred space of Pityana's home. We listened to African music together, discussed the recently published *Kairos Document*, read African liberation poetry, debated politics with various Black liberation movements, and engaged in rigorous and vigorous discussion on the Bible and theology. I was directed by these comrades to the many books on Black Theology that were banned in South Africa, but which were now accessible to me in the UK. My re-education as a White South African was in process.

While the relationships formed in Pityana's home provided the hearth for my journey of being partially reconstituted by Blackness, it was a lunch table in the cafeteria at Manchester University that provided my burning bush experience. Together with students and staff from the Biblical Studies department at Sheffield University, I was attending a meeting of the Society for the Study of the Old Testament (SOTS). During a lunch break, I made my way to the university cafeteria in search of a modest meal. On my way to the food counters I passed two young Black men sitting at a table over their lunch. As I approached their table I recognised them as South Africans, for they were speaking isiZulu. They noticed my attentive gaze, paused, and smiled. I acknowledged them, greeted them in isiXhosa, paused, and then made to pass on. This was 1986 and the height of repression in South Africa and of anti-apartheid activism in the UK. As a White South African I was never sure of my welcome within circles of the anti-apartheid movement who did not know me, so did not presume that these two young Black men would want to engage me. Their response to my greeting was immediate. They warmly welcomed and embraced me, insisting that I join them at their table. The SOTS conference was forgotten, as I spent the next two to three hours with them. Their engagement with me and our conversation changed the trajectory of my life, beginning a process of being partially reconstituted by Blackness.

Among the formative factors from that conversation that have shaped my life since, I have discerned the following strands. First, my African companions simply assumed that I was an African; that I experienced the UK in much the same way as they did. While this was true in part, for I did experience much of UK reality as foreign, being White, English speaking, and blue-eyed meant that I was not treated by White Britains as they were. Second, they acknowledged my White privilege, but re-framed it as a potential resource if it was governed and disciplined by the Black struggle, by Blackness. They urged me to continue to offer my privileged South African education, as well as my tertiary education in the UK, to the liberation movements when I returned home to South Africa. Third, they made it absolutely clear that Whiteness was a pathology, a pathology of the desire for control. My Whiteness would need to be summoned and shaped by Blackness. They told stories of how White anti-apartheid activists tended to dominate, believing that they would lead the struggle against apartheid. However, they insisted, what Whiteness had constructed could not be dismantled by Whites, even well-

intentioned Whites like me. This was a particular moment of revelation for me. I too had carried the burden of this White pathology, imagining that I would have to play a leadership role in the destruction of apartheid, yet also knowing that I could not. My two Black brothers lifted the burden from me, redirecting me, relocating me under Black leadership and a Black project. The liberation of South Africa would be carried out by Black South Africans. I had something to contribute, but what and when would be determined by Black South Africans. Fourth, and finally, they urged me to return home as soon as was safe, for our place was in the struggle at home, not in the UK.

I therefore used my remaining time in the UK diligently, completing a Masters in Biblical Studies on the hermeneutic dimensions of biblical historiography and beginning my hermeneutically oriented PhD project on "Biblical Interpretation in Theologies of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context of Liberation". What prompted my PhD focus was another set of correspondence, this time with Itumeleng Mosala. Among the books I had read while in the UK was the recently published (1986) *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, edited by Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Mosala and Tlhagale 1986). Within this profound collection I was particularly impacted by Lebamang Sebidi's "The Dynamics of the Black Struggle and Its Implications for Black Theology" (Sebidi 1986) and Itumeleng Mosala's "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology" (Mosala 1986). Both worked with the notion of race and/as class, which aligned with the class-based work I was doing in Old Testament studies, specifically the work of Norman Gottwald in his pioneering study (1979) *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Gottwald 1979). Mosala drew explicitly and substantially on Gottwald's work, intersecting race and/as class, so there was an immediate resonance.

Encouraged by the summons of my lunch-time companions to submit my work to the Black struggle, I wrote a letter to Itumeleng Mosala, then at the University of Cape Town (UCT), sharing with him my interest in his hermeneutical work on race and/as class within Black biblical hermeneutics, his use of Gottwald's notion of the formation of ancient Israel as a class struggle, and his critical understanding of the kinds of contestations then taking place within South African Black Theology, outlined in his essay. He responded immediately, embracing me as my lunch time companions had, and sent me a steady supply of his work, including a draft copy of his 1987 PhD, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa" (Mosala 1987), which was later published in 1989 under the same title (Mosala 1989). Significantly, Mosala also drew me into the hermeneutical debate within Black Theology about whether and how to use the Bible in the liberation struggle.

As his work made clear, Mosala wanted other South African Black theologians to recognise the resonances between the race and/as class struggle in South Africa and the class struggle in ancient Israel. But they would only be able to hear and see such resonance, Mosala argued, if they abandoned their view of the Bible as the monovocal Word of God, recognising instead that the Bible itself, intrinsically, was a site of ideological and theological struggle, with multiple contending voices from within its sites of production (West 2020). Mosala was eager for me to contribute, through my PhD, "Biblical Interpretation in Theologies of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context of Liberation" (West 1990a), to this debate within Black Theology.

Mosala was correct in discerning that there might be a contribution for my work within Black Theology, and as it turned out, within Contextual Theology too. I was less familiar with Contextual Theology at the time, though I had worked through the *The Kairos Document* thoroughly with Pityana and his circle of comrades (Kairos 1985). My understanding of *The Kairos Document*, then and now (West 2012), has been shaped substantially by a Black Theology hermeneutical lens. Once back in South Africa in 1988, having been advised by Mosala to base myself at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, where a new programme in prophetic contextual theology was being established, shaped by *The Kairos Document*, I was drawn into Contextual Theology circles, through the colleagues then based in the Department of Theological Studies at the University of Natal, especially Gunther Wittenberg, Jonathan Draper, Jim Cochrane, and Chris Langeveldt. They each had strong connections to the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in Johannesburg, and they drew me into their collaborative work, recognising connections between my biblical hermeneutic work and ICT's community-based biblical and theological work.

Pietermaritzburg proved a fertile site for both my PhD work and my ongoing political education of being partially reconstituted by Blackness. Khoza Mgojo appointed me as a part-time lecturer teaching Greek at Federal Theological Seminary (FedSem) in his place in 1988, as he had taken on the role of the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist church. FedSem continued the work of disciplining my Whiteness within the Black theological project, as did the growing numbers of Black students who were doing postgraduate studies in the Department of Theological Studies, as well as an emerging new generation of Black theology scholars like Tinyiko Maluleke (see for example Maluleke 1996).

Among the most significant of the Black students studying at the School of Theology in Pietermaritzburg at the time in terms of my work and vocation was Frank Chikane, who was completing a Masters in Theology with Cochrane. Even though I was completing a Sheffield University PhD, Cochrane had invited me to participate in the small postgraduate seminar group he facilitated, which included Chikane and a number of other comrades. We met regularly, though somewhat secretly, for Chikane's life was constantly being threatened because of his work as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC).

Chikane and I shared in common the legacy of having been expelled from our Pentecostal churches because of our political-theological analysis and praxis, him from the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in 1981 and me from the Assemblies of God in 1983. But it was biblical hermeneutics that forged a deep bond between us. After I had read a section of my PhD work in the seminar (what is now chapter 3 of the book, and which focussed on the hermeneutic contestation between Allan Boesak and Itumeleng Mosala) (Mosala 1989:33–42; West 1991a:42–62) Chikane became profoundly animated and urged me to continue this hermeneutical analysis, making it clear that it was important for the Black struggle that we understood more clearly the hermeneutical dimensions of biblical interpretation. He went further, linking me with the Theology Exchange Programme (TEP) and providing the funds for me to visit Brazil in 1990 in order to learn from the various liberation Bible-reading movements in Latin America at the time. The visit to Brazil was decisive for the direction my work would take (West 2022a; 2024), insisting that biblical hermeneutics must give a primary place to the economically and

politically marginalised reader of the Bible.

This question has shaped my work in each of its three intersecting trajectories: how do socially engaged biblical scholars read the Bible *with* organised communities of the poor and marginalised? (West 1995a: 174–215; West and Dube 1996; West 1999); how has the Bible been received and read by Black South Africans since it arrived in southern Africa as an instrument of imperialism in 1652? (West 2016:19–444); how is the Bible being used by Black South Africans in the public realm? (West 2016:445–542) My journey along each of these trajectories has been guided by Black (South) Africans, as has my community-based activist work, which my academic published work clearly acknowledges and demonstrates. As Sharon Welch, appropriating Michel Foucault, so aptly puts it, being partially reconstituted by work with others is a foundational hermeneutical position:

> Foucault argues that we can see a system of logic as a particular system and not as truth itself only when we are partially constituted by different systems of producing truth. We can transcend the blinders of our own social location, not through becoming objective, but by recognizing the differences by which we ourselves are constituted and, I would add to Foucault, by actively seeking to be partially constituted by work with different groups (Welch 1990:151).

My own consistent social location within Blackness, working with Black activist intellectuals and organised Black communities, has taken seriously Welch's underdeveloped notion of "work with". White socially engaged scholars must be summoned, disciplined, mentored, and shaped by Blackness as their foundation hermeneutical reconstitution, again and again (Maluleke 2024).

Invading invited space

On my return to South Africa in 1988, I was not only a hermeneutically inclined linguist; I was becoming a hermeutically attentive biblical scholar (of a particular kind). Fortunately, my biblical scholar mentors were people like Itumeleng Mosala, Gunther Wittenberg, Bernard Lategan, and Jonathan Draper. Each of them were both hermeneutically astute and hermeneutical activists. The late 1980s were a time of hermeneutical contestation, as is so clearly evident in Mosala's work (Mosala 1986; 1989). Hermeneutics, we contended, was not a positivistic science but a site of ideological struggle. In the words of Takatso Mofokeng, "the physical struggle for control of the material means of subsistence has to be complemented by a struggle for control of the Bible that contains the means for ideological and spiritual subsistence" (Mofokeng 1987:39).

Dirk Smit, a theological scholar who made a serious commitment to straddling and intersecting South African 'theology' and 'biblical studies' discourses, provides an incisive analysis of hermeneutics as a site of contestation. Writing in 1990, he summarises his analysis as follows: "To conclude with some generalizations: looking at the past decades, one can perhaps say that the stage where Afrikaner Reformed biblical scholarship served the *apartheid* ideology was replaced by one in which a scientific ethos dominated, in which the scholars tried to carry on as if nothing was happening in society" (Smit 1990:41). Jonathan Draper, a colleague, makes a similar assessment, arguing that,

"'Interesting readings' abound in the New Testament Society of South Africa ... but outside the gates stand the angry [Black] youth asking why they should read the Bible at all" (Draper 1991:237). Both Smit and Draper warrant careful reading, offering as they do an incisive analysis of the prevailing hermeneutic orientation within both the Old Testament Society of South Africa (OTSSA) and the New Testament Society of South Africa (NTSSA) in the early 1990s. My argument in invoking their work, to paraphrase David Tracy, is that there is no innocent hermeneutic (Tracy 1987:79; for a fuller engagement with Tracy in this regard see West 1992b).

Each of these South African biblical societies were at the time, in the 1990s, and for a considerable time thereafter, what my colleague Sithembiso Zwane refers to as "invited space". Citing the development work of Andrea Cornwall, but appropriating it for the South African context, Zwane refers to "invited spaces" as those 'development' spaces that are represented as open to all, even the marginalised, but in reality "serve the interest of those with close proximity to power and resources in both the public and private spheres" (Zwane 2020:216). This was my experience of both the OTSSA and the NTSSA. And this has certainly also been the experience of Black OTSSA and NTSSA members (see for example, Masenya and Ramantswana 2012; Tshehla 2014; Ramantswana 2020).

Once again, I was fortunate to have mentors who helped me to navigate and to build an interpretive resilience as I invaded the invited space of the OTSSA and the NTSSA. Gunther Wittenberg, who was Professor of Old Testament at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, invited me to accompany him to the 1989 OTSSA Congress. What became obvious to me was that Wittenberg's 'contextual' hermeneutics (similar to Mosala's), in which he brought the realities of apartheid South Africa into a liberation-oriented ideological dialogue with the realities of the ancient world which produced the Old Testament, was not shared by many OTSSA members. Wittenberg recognised this, but persisted, invading the invited space of context 'neutral' biblical scholarship (see for example Wittenberg 1991a), invigorating (to use Zwane's spatial term (Zwane 2020: 216))) the space for others, like me (West 1991b) and an emerging generation of Black Old Testament scholars (see for example Masenya 1991). Our papers and publications were to continue disrupting the controlled space of the OTSSA (Ramantswana 2016).

My experience with the NTSSA was similar to that of Jonathan Draper, who was Professor of New Testament at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, providing mentorship and invigorated space for my participation (Draper and West 1989; Draper 1991; see also Draper 2015). Alongside Draper, Bernard Lategan offered explicit hermeneutic mentorship within the NTSSA, but also more importantly within the Centre for Contextual Theology at Stellenbosch University (Smit 1990:41; 2015:7). The work of the Centre for Contextual Theology, under Lategan's leadership, understood that biblical hermeneutics was another of South Africa's 'sites of struggle' (Smit 2015:4). The Centre for Contextual Theology was academic invigorated space, alongside emerging forms of "invented space", to borrow again Zwane's spatial continuum taken from development studies (Zwane 2020:216). The invigorated hermeneutic space that was emerging in South African biblical scholarship in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to various invented spaces, like Black Consciousness and Black Theology (see for example Mosala and Tlhagale 1986; Goba 1988; Gibson 1988; Masenya 1994; Magaziner 2010) and the Contextual Theology process and product of the *Kairos Document* (Kairos 1985; Denis

2017). However, while biblical hermeneutics within the trajectory of the *Kairos Document* was biblical hermeneutics within the cauldron of the anti-apartheid struggle (Kairos 1986; Speckman and Kaufmann 2001), biblical hermeneutics within the trajectory of the Centre for Contextual Theology was biblical hermeneutics on the margins of mainstream South African biblical studies, contending with and invigorating that space.

This is not to say that the Centre for Contextual Theology was not directly engaged in public life, for it was (Smit 2015:10–11). My article, however, reflects on the biblical hermeneutic contribution of the Centre for Contextual Theology, for it provided an important invigorated space in which to take on the task of 'Reflection' in the 'Action-Reflection' cycle of liberation praxis.

The Centre for Contextual Theology (and *Scriptura*)

During 1990, Wittenberg and I caucused with activist and academic anti-apartheid organisations about the usefulness of a community-based contextual Bible study project (ISB 1990; West 2022a:6–7). Among the organisations I visited as the researcher for what would become the Institute for the Study of the Bible (and later the Ujamaa Centre) was the Centre for Contextual Theology, established in the Faculty of Arts at Stellenbosch University in the mid-1980s, with Bernard Lategan as its first Director (Conradie 2020:3). They were also part of the Pietermaritzburg workshop hosted at the end of 1990, "The Bible and Social Transformation: Liberating Bible Study with Grassroots Communities", in which we launched the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB), inviting those we have caused with to participate in biblical hermeneutic reflection and the launch of the ISB (ISB 1990). Staff from the Centre for Contextual Theology had supported the need for a community-based contextual Bible study project and were impressed by the overt hermeneutical orientation of the workshop, in which we facilitated contextual Bible studies among the participants using different hermeneutical approaches (West 2022a:9–10).

This early collaboration with the Centre for Contextual Theology, and its relationship with *Scriptura: Journal of Bible and Theology in Southern Africa*, led to an invitation from Bernard Lategan, then the Director of the Centre for Contextual Theology and the Editor of *Scriptura*, to contribute an article which reflected on the early conceptual work of the ISB. This proved an important hermeneutic opportunity for the ISB, for it provided an invigorated space outside the control of South African biblical societies within which to wrestle with contextual biblical hermeneutics. Though most of the articles in the September 1990 volume of *Scriptura* (volume 35) overlapped with the kinds of papers presented at either the OTSSA or the NTSSA, my own contribution disrupted this trajectory (West 1990b), inviting a more overtly 'contextual' hermeneutical orientation in the liberation theology sense. My article was explicitly located "with those who are committed to reading the Bible from within and for the community of struggle, the community of those who are victims of and those who are opposed to the apartheid system" (West 1990b:11). In terms of biblical hermeneutics, my paper probed the relationship between the socio-historical textual emphasis of Itumeleng Mosala and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and the literary-narrative textual emphasis of Allan Boesak and Phyllis Trible. I argued here, and more fully in my PhD thesis and the related book (West 1990a, 1991a, 1995a), "that there is no one mode of reading which has a privileged

relationship to the context of struggle" (West 1990b:21). Each of the three modes of reading I discussed, "whether focussing behind the text, or on the text, or in front of the text, offers a coherent and theoretically well-grounded hermeneutics of liberation" (West 1990b:21). Crucially, I then introduced what has become a decisive, distinctive feature of the Ujamaa Centre's biblical hermeneutics: "However", I continue, "fascinating as this discussion has been, and will continue to be, it is largely a discussion among trained readers. Given that interpreters within contexts of liberation have argued for the epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed ..., surely their voice should be heard?" (West 1990b:21).

The invigorated space that *Scriptura* had offered the ISB was amplified by the establishment in April 1991 of a specifically contextual hermeneutic project within the Centre for Contextual Theology, namely, the "Consultation on Contextual Hermeneutics". Each Consultation was precisely that, an invigorated dialogical space for reflection on 'contextual hermeneutics'. The venue was carefully selected to enable conversation, with an inner circle of invited participants and an outer circle of itinerant observers, with opportunity throughout the Consultation for exchange across these circles. I remember well the incisive contributions, for example, of the feminist theologian Denise Ackerman and the philosopher Johan Degenaar. Our reflection was overtly hermeneutical yet without a rigid understanding of 'hermeneutics' as we found our way together. This was invigorated space indeed, and significantly the journal *Scriptura* played a vital role in publicising the work being done in these consultations, starting with the papers from the first Consultation: "Issues in Contextual Hermeneutics", Special Issue S9, 1991. *Scriptura*'s participation in this project broadened the consultations' invigorated biblical hermeneutic space. Academic journals are usually invited space, so *Scriptura*'s willingness to disrupt and invigorate biblical and theological academic discourse was a crucial contribution. *Scriptura*'s bold and brave initiative made a significant contribution to the formation of the "invented" (Zwane 2020:216–217) space of the discipline of 'contextual biblical hermeneutics' (Conradie 2020; Lawrence et al. 2024; West 2024b).

Lategan recognised the opportunity these consultations presented for taking contextual hermeneutic reflection deeper, and so the first "Consultation on Contextual Hermeneutics" in 1991 focussed specifically on "The Challenge of Contextuality" (Lategan 1991). Lategan's astute analysis of the notion of 'contextuality' reiterated the analysis from his seminal 1984 article, "Current Issues in the Hermeneutical Debate" (Lategan 1984), work which was pivotal to my own work (West 1991a:7–10). More significantly, in terms of the work of the ISB being received within and contributing to this hermeneutical project, Lategan was explicit in his affirmation:

> Contextual hermeneutics was perhaps the first really to take the 'ordinary' reader seriously. The distinction between reader and the critic has been the subject of intense debate on the theoretical level (cf Fowler 1991:27–31), but on the pragmatic level efforts to bring theology to the member in the pew is gaining momentum. The work of West (West 1991a), who also contributes to this volume, at the Institute for the Study of the Bible in Pietermaritzburg merits special mention in this regard (Lategan 1991:5).

He was affirming too of the contribution of the late Welile Mazamisa, who participated in this first Consulation, not only through his embodied presence as a Black theologian but also through his distinctive hermeneutic analysis (and through his role on the Editorial Committee of *Scriptura*). As I have already indicated, in the understanding of Black Consciousness, both Blackness and Whiteness are critical and distinctive hermeneutical features (Frostin 1988:89–92). Mazamisa's presence disrupted any sense that the Consultation was invited White space, disrupting and invigorating the dialogical space of the Consultation (Mazamisa 1991:67–68). His paper, published in *Scriptura*, remains one of his few published articles (Hombana 2024), and so once again *Scriptura* has played a significant role in destabilising the dominant biblical and theological discourse. Mazamisa introduced the concept of a movement "from orality to literacy/textuality and back" into the hermeneutic conversation (Mazamisa 1991). Lategan acknowledges this contribution and its implied relationship to the work of the ISB, for immediately after his affirmation of my paper he states: "At the same time, this implies that the context of *orality* must also be taken into account and that we cannot confine ourselves to the context of *written* texts only" (Lategan 1991:5).

Lategan's implied analysis here is astute, for Mazamisa's conceptual movement from orality to textuality to orality is central to the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) methodology of the ISB (now the Ujamaa Centre). A typical CBS is largely oral, with most of a CBS being done orally among the participants in small groups, followed by oral report-back to the plenary gathering of the small groups. Within a CBS, the biblical text is largely a heard text, beginning with a public plenary reading, preferably a dramatic reading, followed by regular oral re-readings in the small group. Mazamisa is right to point out that textualisation produces a "fixed text" (Mazamisa 1991:72), which the Ujamaa Centre deconstructs, facilitating slow re-readings of the text in small groups, probing textual detail neglected by the churches, and in this way destabilising the (churches') fixed text and its fixed theological meaning, as well as 'hearing' and recovering the oral dimensions of biblical text (see for example Draper 1996; Perry 2019).

The ISB experimented hermeneutically, working with particular local community-based organisations, in the early 1990s with various participatory hermeneutical forms of re-reading of the Bible, attentive to each of Lategan's three vectors (Lategan 1984:3), whether behind-the-text (socio-historical detail), on-the-text (literary-narrative detail), or in-front-of-the-text (thematic-symbolic detail). My paper at this first Consultation reported on this work, demonstrating and reflecting on the three CBSs we had facilitated based on each of these three modes of reading (West 1991c). This was formative hermeneutic work, preparing the way both for decades of diverse CBS (see for example West 2022b), and for hermeneutic reflection on the relationship between 'the scholarly reader' and 'the ordinary reader' (West and Dube 1996; Lategan 1996; Weems 1996; Patte 1996; Hinga 1996; Ukpong 2002:23–25; Nadar 2006; 2009).

Within the 1991 Consultation itself, our corporate discussion of this relationship had a profound effect on the two visiting co-presenters from the USA, Daniel Patte and Gary Phillips, particularly as they had been overt and vulnerable about discovering, recovering and owning their White male perspectives (Patte and Phillips 1991). Patte would continue to reflect on social location, as well as on the relationship between the biblically trained reader and the ordinary reader/user of the Bible (Patte 1995a, 1995b), and would,

as the General Editor of *Semeia: An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism*, commission Musa Dube and I to work on a volume of *Semeia* which would embody this relationship (West and Dube 1996), and to which he would offer a response (Patte 1996).

Scriptura, under Lategan's leadership, continued to provide invigorated space between the consultations for ISB-related work, inviting both my doctoral student Timothy Long and I to offer articles on the hermeneutic relationship between literary theory and social context, in which we each continued to engage the hermeneutic dimensions, via deconstruction theory, of the relationship between the "expert/ordinary reader" (Long 1992:50) and of the relationship between contemporary South African and ancient biblical "communities of faith and struggle" (West 1992b:47). *Scriptura* would continue to provide invigorated academic space for hermeneutic reflection under successive editors (Conradie 2020:3–8), would change its name to signal a commitment to hermeneutic reflection, *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* (Conradie 2020:3–4), and would continue to publish reader-oriented research (see for example Conradie 2001; Jonker 2021).

Disrupting the First Public (from the Third)

The presence of Patte and Phillips at the first Consultation and their interrogation of the ethical accountability (of White males) in the teaching of the Bible (Patte and Phillips 1991) generated the focus of the second (1992) and third (1993) consultations on "The Integrity of Theological Education", and once again *Scriptura* provided the invigorated publication space for a double volume on this theme, "The Integrity of Theological Education" (*Scriptura* S11, 1993). Each of these two pedagogy consultations hosted by the Centre for Contextual Theology shifted the terrain of hermeneutic struggle to a more familiar domain, that of theological education within the academy.

David Tracy's notion of three publics had hovered over each of the consultations (Tracy 1981), being invoked in a number of different ways by many of us participants. I invoke Tracy here to reflect on the shift, from the perspective of the ISB (and Ujamaa Centre), from a focus on the third public (society) to a focus on the first public (the academy), but via our third public community-based work (see also Cochrane 1999:123).

When Gunther Wittenberg envisaged the establishment of the ISB in 1988, his initial impulse was to base it outside of the academy, much like the Centro de Estudios Biblicos (CEBI) in Brazil (Wittenberg 1988; West 2022a:3–5). However, he was persuaded by colleagues in the School of Theology at the University of Natal (now the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal) to situate the ISB within the School so that it could facilitate the 'contextualisation' of the theological programme as a whole (West 2022a:5; see also Cochrane 1996; Cochrane 1999:15–19). My papers at the second and third consultations of the Centre for Contextual Theology reported on the hermeneutic work of the ISB and its relationship to the pedagogical hermeneutics within the theological programme (West 1992a; 1993b), beginning a process of ongoing reflection on the relationship between the community-based work of the ISB and the pedagogical work of the School of Theology (see for example West 2004; West and Zwane 2020).

Besides his foundational work in establishing and shaping the ISB, Wittenberg continued to disrupt Old Testament scholarship in South Africa (and beyond), both within the invited space of the Old Testament Studies (the journal of the Old Testament

Society of South Africa) (Wittenberg 1991a, 1993, 1995) and within the invigorated space of the *Journal of Theology for South Africa* (a journal situated within contextual theological trajectories) (Wittenberg 1991b, 1991c, 1994). In addition, Wittenberg made a significant contribution to contextual pedagogy in his essay in the *Semeia* 73 volume on 'reading with', reflecting on what it meant to do Old Testament theology 'with' poor and marginalised communities and what this would look like for theological pedagogy (Wittenberg 1996).

Outside ISB and the School of Theology my engagement with the Old and New Testament societies in South Africa remained limited. These were invited spaces for the kind of work we were doing, and I was even accused during the early 1990s of "not doing biblical studies, but communist propaganda". However, as I have said, various scholarly mentors made a way for me. I remember clearly, for example, presenting a paper on "Constructing Critical and Contextual Readings with Ordinary Readers: Mark 5:21–6:1" at the 1994 New Testament Society of South Africa Congress. This was an attempt to share with New Testament colleagues the kinds of hermeneutic issues the ISB was grappling with. I had hoped for hermeneutical engagement, and so I was not prepared for the hostile, often ad hominem, response from a vocal number of members. While I paused to reflect on how to respond, Bernard Lategan intervened, stood up, and situated my paper within emerging debates in hermeneutics taking place internationally. The atmosphere in the conference room changed immediately; Lategan used his stature within the NTSSA to enable me to be heard. He also encouraged me to publish the paper (West 1995b), as he had previously encouraged me to publish a Consultation-related hermeneutical article in *Neotestmentica* the year before (West 1993a). It may well have been this article in *Neotestamentica* in 1993, followed by my in-person presentation of a hermeneutically similar ordinary-reader-oriented paper at the NTSSA Congress in 1994 that aroused such antagonism. Fortunately, Lategan and others invigorated this narrowly controlled scholarly space, making a significant contribution to creating the invented space of 'contextual biblical interpretation' as a distinctive sub-discipline within biblical studies (West 2024b).

Conclusion

In this article, I have adopted an auto-biographical perspective, but one that is inclusive of the comrade-scholars I acknowledge and celebrate in this article. I have been fortunate to have had many mentors who have made a way for me, and more importantly for the work of the Ujamaa Centre. I have focussed in this article on the work of the Centre for Contextual Theology and the work of *Scriptura* in the early 1990s, and those associated with these projects, foregrounding both my and the Ujamaa Centre's hermeneutic formation and how the Centre for Contextual Theology and *Scriptura* constructed an invigorated space for hermeneutic reflection in the midst of the controlled spaces of South African biblical scholarship in the early 1990s.

Both the Centre for Contextual Theology and *Scriptura* were inclusive of 'ordinary readers' in their many dimensions, including their oral reality, while giving careful attention to the hermeneutic dimensions of the biblical text, in terms of its ancient sites of production, its sites of textual identity, and its sites of contemporary reception. In the midst of South Africa's many sites of struggle at time, biblical hermeneutics too was a site of struggle. Indeed, our collaborative struggle with 'hermeneutics' in our South

African context demonstrated that deliberate hermeneutic reflection had the capacity to transform us and the discipline of contextual biblical interpretation (West 2024b).

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