

Contextual Bible Study as a Form of Contextual Theology: An Early Conceptual History

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Abstract

This article analyses the formative period of a particular form of contextual theology, South African Contextual Bible Study (CBS), from 1988–1993. This form of contextual theology is located within the range of South African contextual theologies, including specifically the Institute for Contextual Theology’s Contextual Theology and South African Black Theology. CBS receives its shape from these related contextual theologies but has a particular emphasis on biblical studies, recognising the importance of both the role of the socially engaged biblical scholar and the relevance of biblical studies method to contextual theology. The significance of this historical analysis is that it documents and analyses the formative period of what has become an internationally recognised form of contextual biblical studies and theology.

Keywords: Contextual Bible Study; contextual theology; biblical interpretation; Black Theology

Introduction

“Contextual Bible Study,” as the name signifies, has a direct relationship with South African contextual theology. This article analyses that relationship, reflecting on the formative period in which Contextual Bible Study (CBS) took on its characteristic conceptual shape. This formative period extends from Gunther Wittenberg’s visit to Brazil in 1988 to the publication of Gerald West’s book *Contextual Bible Study* in 1993 (West 1993). Though a relatively short time period, the period had considerable political and theological conceptual significance, both in South Africa and what was then referred to as the “Third World.”

CBS is partially constituted by a range of intersecting liberation theologies, and while reference will be made briefly to other strands of liberation theology, the emphasis in



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this article is on what in South Africa was referred to as “contextual theology.” The article will chart the conceptual history of CBS as it was given its shape by a range of related South African contextual theologies, including what has become known as “Contextual Theology,” the specific form of contextual theology associated with the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT).

The significance of this historical analysis will be discussed briefly in the conclusion, recognising that this particular South African form of contextual theology has, over more than 30 years, become an internationally recognised form of contextual biblical studies and theology.

Contextual Theology

In his essay, “Questioning Contextual Theology,” James Cochrane provides an incisive analysis of how the concept of “contextual theology” was understood in South Africa during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the same way that Per Frostin offered a conceptual and synthetic analysis of “liberation theology” in his 1988 book, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation* (Frostin 1988, 1–26), in this essay Cochrane (2001) does something similar with “contextual theology.”

There are a number of elements to Cochrane’s conceptual analysis. First, “it does *not* mean theology arising from a particular context and speaking to that context. All theology does that” (Cochrane 2001, 73). Cochrane is right to begin here, though he probably overstates the readiness of a theology to declare its contextual location. Most theologies elide their contextual location, preferring the allusion of universality. Though not in Cochrane’s analysis, a distinctive conceptual feature of contextual theology—the acknowledgement that each and every “theology” arises from and speaks to a particular context—is a presupposition of Cochrane’s subsequent analysis. Second, what is distinctive about contextual theology is that it is inclusive of “the voice of the other,” both “in word” and “in deed” (Cochrane 2001, 74). Third, contextual theology goes further, seeking to give voice and space to “the subjugated other” (Cochrane 2001, 75). As Cochrane recognises: “This line of thinking binds contextual theology to the several contemporary expressions of theology that seek to give voice, and space, to women, the poor, the disabled, the aged (in some contexts), and the like. It also indicates,” continues Cochrane, “a link to Black Theology, with its specific genesis in a consciousness of racism and the experience of racist domination upon blacks—defined generically rather than ethnically. Black Theology gives voice to their presence, their struggle” (Cochrane 2001, 75). Fourth, a further distinctive conceptual feature of contextual theology is the recognition that the subjugated other “is not an abstract other ... but a person,” who is “impacted upon, by forces larger than themselves,” whose voices are subjugated “not simply by other voices, but by structures of power and of economy” (Cochrane 2001, 75).

Fifth, Cochrane goes on to identify the central conceptual process of “the genre” of contextual theologies “propagated in South Africa” (Cochrane 2001, 76). The distinctive conceptual process of this local South African variant of contextual theology is “the tripartite command to ‘see-judge-act’” (Cochrane 2001, 76). The see-judge-act process is, Cochrane argues, central to the contextual theology of Young Christian Workers (YCW), Young Christian Students (YCS), and the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT). “Indeed,” Cochrane argues, “Nolan’s early definition of contextual theology for ICT went precisely in that direction” (Cochrane 2001, 77; see also ICT n.d.). It is from within the work of the ICT that contextual theology would emerge as a distinctive South African liberation theology, becoming known as Contextual Theology (converting an adjectival modifier into a proper name), particularly through the work of Albert Nolan (Denis 2015, 2017), who is considered “as the ‘epitome’ of Contextual Theology in South Africa” (Speckman and Kaufmann 2001a, xi) and who, “[i]n both church and secular circles ... is associated with Contextual Theology” (Speckman and Kaufmann 2001b, 2).¹

A sixth distinctive conceptual feature may be discerned from Cochrane’s analysis when he argues that a significant strength of contextual theology’s commitment to the voice of the subjugated other “is that there is ample theological warrant for it in the scriptures, in the New Testament in particular” (Cochrane 2001, 75). Here Cochrane recognises the importance that forms of contextual theology place on the Bible. CBS embraces and takes its shape from each of the five distinctive conceptual features Cochrane has discerned, with the sixth, the scriptures, at its centre.

Cochrane’s analysis could be supplemented by the analysis of others (see, for example, the essays in Speckman and Kaufmann 2001c), but it serves as a useful conceptual summary of contextual theology’s distinctive conceptual features. In the next section of the article, I analyse the early formative impulses that gave rise to CBS as a particular sub-genre of contextual theology.

Formative Conceptual Impulses

Though biblical interpretation is a fundamental element of South African contextual theology, CBS is a particular form of contextual biblical interpretation. CBS, as it came to be called, has its origins within liberation theologies in general and liberation biblical hermeneutics in particular. However, CBS also had a specific founding moment, the visit of Gunther Wittenberg to Brazil in 1988.

Forged politically and theologically within the anti-apartheid liberation struggle, particularly within the ecumenical intersections of South African Contextual Theology and South African Black Theology (see West 2021, 535–544), Gunther Wittenberg

1 I have used “Contextual Theology” when referring specifically to the form of contextual theology associated with the ICT.

attended the “Third World Lutheran Theological Educators Conference” in Brazil in 1988 in what was to be a formative visit (Wittenberg 1993). In his report on his visit, Wittenberg draws particular attention to three ecumenical organisations he visited, Centro Ecumênico de Documentação e Informação (CEDI), Centro Ecumênico de Evangelização, Capacitação e Assessoria (CECA), and Centro de Estudos Bíblicos (CEBI). Common features of each of these ecumenical organisations were their parachurch community-based social location, their political involvement in the liberation struggle, their emphasis on methodology, and the importance of the Bible as a resource for “the people’s struggle” (Wittenberg 1988b, 2).

As a biblical scholar serving the South African liberation struggle with his scholarship (Wittenberg 1988a, 16), Wittenberg was particularly interested in the work of CEBI. His report reflects on the history, the organisational structure, the programmes, and resources of CEBI (Wittenberg 1988b, 4–5). He records the primary purpose of CEBI, in his words, as “to supply biblical material for Bible study in the poor base communities” (Wittenberg 1988b, 4). In addition to visiting these ecumenical organisations, Wittenberg also visited a number of pastoral agents aligned with these ecumenical organisations, for whom community-based Bible study was a vital resource. Indeed, it was Milton Schwantes, one of the founders of CEBI (for a brief history of CEBI, see Schinelo 2009, 57–66), who had set up Wittenberg’s visits to these ecumenical organisations. Clearly, Schwantes’s intersection of biblical scholarship, political commitment, participation in the programmes of ecumenical organisations, and pastoral engagement with communities of the poor, resonated with Wittenberg (Wittenberg 1988b, 5–6). Furthermore, when he visited Patrick Clarke “of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, who has founded Movimento de Defesa do Favelado (MDF), designed to help the poor in the favelas,” he was particularly struck by Clarke’s pedagogical methodology, which “is not to work *for* but *with* the people”; “to put aside a spiritual colonialism and to listen and to build on the aspirations expressed by the people” (Wittenberg 1988b, 6).

Another person Wittenberg visited in Sao Paulo with Schwantes was Gilberto Gorgulho. He, too, was a biblical scholar, pastoral agent, and activist. As biblical scholars, what Schwantes (1982), Gorgulho (Anderson and Gorgulho 1984), and Wittenberg shared in common was a methodological orientation towards historical and sociological analysis of the Bible (Wittenberg 1988a, 1993), along with a fundamental commitment to offering these socio-historical resources to base-communities within the pedagogical ideology of Paulo Freire (Wittenberg 1988b, 5). Given this emphasis on socio-historical resources, Wittenberg documents in his report the in-depth and intensive Bible-reading courses offered by CEBI at that time, including “4 months of intensive study of the Bible including Greek and Hebrew for those who had some academic training, usually pastors, priests and nuns.” Critically, a “precondition” for the CEBI course lecturers was their “participation in the popular movements” (Wittenberg 1988b, 4–5). In these participatory courses, the canonical text was re-read, not in its final form, but along a socio-historically reconstructed trajectory (G.V. Pixley 1991; J. Pixley 1992),

following, for example, the pioneering socio-historical work of Norman Gottwald (Gottwald 1979, 1985).

However, as already indicated, what resonated most with Wittenberg as he reflected on his visit to Brazil was how biblical scholars like Schwantes, who though a professor of biblical studies, “was greatly involved in the grassroots Bible Movement of ordinary people.” This “fascinated” Wittenberg (ISB 2000, 14–15). “I saw how liberation theology was a living, dynamic concern and how it reached the people” through the many courses and projects offered by socially-engaged seminaries and CEBI. “Things that I saw in Brazil resonated with me,” says Wittenberg, “and everything started to come together in my mind. I was convinced that we needed something similar in South Africa” (ISB 2000, 16).

On his return from Brazil, Wittenberg’s first impulse in working towards a South African version of CEBI, the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB), was to resign from his biblical studies post at the University of Natal. In February 1989, during the staff retreat which gave shape to each new academic year, Wittenberg told colleagues in the School of Theology, in his words, “that I was thinking of resigning from the university in order to use my energy in establishing the ISB” (ISB 2000, 16). In the ensuing collaborative discussion, which was a feature of staff retreats, other colleagues in the school persuaded Wittenberg to rather locate the ISB within the school. Among the arguments James Cochrane and other colleagues made were that establishing the ISB within a university during the deeply repressive political context in South Africa of the late 1980s would offer the ISB some protection from the apartheid state; that any really radical engagement with the Bible at local community level would need a strong, defensible, experimental intellectual platform, which a university location would provide; and that training pastoral agents within a university theological programme to understand this task themselves and have the means to practise it would have replicable effects across the churches, given the ecumenical nature of the theological programme in the School of Theology and the ecumenical theological project that would become the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions (Cochrane 2021). Wittenberg was persuaded, but insisted on resigning as head of the department so that he could dedicate himself “to develop the institute” (ISB 2000, 16).

This was a pivotal moment in the establishment of the ISB. Wittenberg’s initial impulse, shaped by what he had witnessed in Brazil, envisaged a “centre” or “institute” for the study of the Bible, similar to CEBI (ISB 2000, 16). The ISB, Wittenberg explains, “seeks to establish an interface between biblical studies and ordinary readers of the Bible in the church and community in order to facilitate social transformation.” “Through the input from grassroots communities the process of Bible studies not only aims at empowering the poor and oppressed who take part in the process, but also seeks,” Wittenberg continues, “to transform the teaching of Biblical Studies at the School of Theology” (Wittenberg 1996, 231). Wittenberg goes on to give a specific example of the transformation of Old Testament study within the academy, indicating

that by the early 1990s, through this two-way “process,” “a new approach to the discipline of Old Testament Theology is emerging. It belongs to a different knowledge system” (Wittenberg 1996, 231), that Wittenberg refers to as “knowledge ‘from below’” (Wittenberg 1996, 231).

Connecting CBS with Contextual Theologies

My own journey with the ISB began in 1989, as I was completing my doctoral studies through Sheffield University, but was graciously hosted by and based in the School of Theology at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg (ISB 2000, 16–17). As I was coming to the end of my research into the role of the Bible in theologies of liberation, I was haunted by what appeared to me to be a tension between the fundamental liberation theology concept of “the epistemological privilege of the poor” (Frostin 1988, 6) and the actual presence of the poor in liberation biblical interpretation. What kind of interpretive community, I asked, might enable what and how the poor know to be constitutive of biblical interpretation for liberation? Wittenberg and I were asking the same question.

During 1989, Wittenberg used his ecumenical network to obtain funds from the Evangelical Mission in Hamburg in order to appoint me as the first “full-time coordinator” of the ISB, under his leadership as director towards the end of 1989 (ISB 2000, 16). My first task during 1990 was consultation. In order to understand the conceptual parameters of the ISB within the matrix of contextual theological work already been done, we consulted widely with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs), and community-based organisations (CBOs), primary within southern Africa and Brazil, but also with anti-apartheid organisations in Britain, Germany and Switzerland (ISB 2000, 17; for a detailed report see ISB 1990).

The anti-apartheid struggle in the late 1980s and early 1990s had substantive social movement-based support through a range of NGOs (such as the Association for Rural Advancement [AFRA]), FBOs (such as the Institute for Contextual Theology [ICT]), and CBOs (such as the Ilimo Community Project [Ilimo]). Our comprehensive consultation process had two primary purposes. First, we wanted to understand more fully how contextual theology was practised by these organisations. Second, given the resonance with the Bible reading movement in Brazil, we were particularly interested in how the Bible was being used by those organisations that were engaged in forms of contextual theology praxis.

Throughout the consultation process, we did not take for granted that there would be a place for another faith-based organisation such as ISB. The Theological Exchange Programme (TEP), in particular, worked through with us both what was distinctive about our project and how we might network with related Bible reading projects (ISB 1990, 17). However, wherever we went and with whomsoever we caucused, it was made clear to us that because our focus was on the Bible itself, there was a need for our

specific contribution within an ecumenical collaboration, working alongside and in solidarity with these more theologically oriented sister ecumenical projects. Both the ICT and the Sinako Bible study programme of The Ecumenical Action Movement (TEAM), for example (ISB 1990, 12–13, 17–18), stressed the importance of developing community-based Bible reading processes that were driven by the people, but with whom socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians collaborated. A contextual Bible reading project required the participation and resources of both. Our dedicated commitment to a contextual re-reading of the Bible through an interface, in which socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible collaborated, was seen as significant and distinctive, yet recognised and affirmed as ecumenically aligned with the ministries and methods of each of these many activist organisations.

In addition to this extensive southern African consultation, I was asked by Frank Chikane, who was then General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and who had been the first full-time director of the ICT, to undertake a visit to Brazil in 1990. “He was very concerned that we understand the potential of the Bible in social transformation within our context” (ISB 2000, 17; 1990, 25), so he allocated funds for my trip from his personal discretionary funds. Chikane had been part of the postgraduate supervision group to which I had been invited, led by James Cochrane within the School of Theology, so he was familiar with my doctoral work and intrigued by the biblical methodological questions I was asking in my thesis. He was convinced that questions of the biblical interpretive method were pivotal with respect to some of the contestations taking place in the South African contextual theology debate, particularly with respect to the use of the Bible (see, for example, Mosala 1986, 13–42), and so wanted to hear how I understood the methodological dimensions of the Brazilian Bible movement and how they related to contextual biblical interpretation in South Africa.

I was fortunate that Cochrane, who had been formed politically and theologically by the Christian Institute (CI), who had played a role in the establishment of both the ICT and TEP, who was deeply committed to an emergent ISB, and who was familiar with my doctoral work, was my companion on the Brazilian visit (ISB 1990, 3–4, 23–24, 40–42, 43, 45, 53–56). TEP, whose ecumenical contribution was focused on Third World political-theological networking and collaboration (Mesters 1987), coordinated our visit to Brazil. In many respects, we followed in the footsteps of Wittenberg, visiting ecumenical organisations, socially engaged academics, pastoral agents, and activists, with an emphasis on the work of CEBI, including attendance for a few days at one of their intensive training courses in São Paulo. I paid careful attention during this course to the interface between formally trained biblical scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible and how biblical studies methods were used within this interface.

My visit to CEBI confirmed what Wittenberg had already discerned. There was a place for socially engaged biblical scholars within a context-driven, ordinary reader-led, Bible re-reading movement. Already committed to a contextual, people’s popular Bible re-

reading orientation and values, my particular question was about method. My doctoral research had identified biblical interpretive method, within South African and other liberation theologies (including feminist theologies), as an area of debate (West 1990, 1991a, 1995). I was especially interested in the role of the socially engaged biblical scholar within liberation biblical hermeneutics. What did it mean, in terms of method, to interpret the Bible *with* the poor and marginalised? Every opportunity I had, I asked CEBI practitioners this question and watched their practice (ISB 1990, 25–34; West 1995, 216–219). What became clear to me was the link between biblical studies method and interpretive method. CEBI, particularly in the southern parts of Brazil (ISB 1990, 30), placed considerable emphasis on socio-historical method with respect to the biblical text, requiring a more overt educative role of the socially engaged biblical scholar, offering ordinary readers liberation-oriented reconstructions of biblical history and sociology (see for example CEBI 1997, 1–2). Facilitation or animation was central to CEBI’s practice (ISB 1990, 29), but the roles of facilitators varied depending on biblical interpretive method. In the north of Brazil, where the final form of the biblical text was the focus, literary-narrative-semiotic method played a role, but the emphasis was on the socio-cultural reception context of the readers (ISB 1990, 30). Here facilitators concentrated on creative participatory group processes, enabling ordinary readers to discern resonant narrative-semiotic dimensions of the biblical text and/as story, but with little attempt to offer a reconstructed text and/as story.

One further factor influenced the choice of biblical method. It became clear during both Wittenberg’s and my visit that historically, Protestant communities were reluctant to allow facilitators to reconstruct the biblical text and/as story, whereas historically, Catholic communities were relatively unfamiliar with the Bible in its detail and so had less concern about a reconstructed text and/as story, particularly when this reconstructed text/as story told of God’s project of liberation (Wittenberg 1988b, 1–2; ISB 1990, 26; Mesters 1987).

While my questions about the socially engaged biblical scholar and biblical method and facilitation practice were not definitively answered, I returned to South Africa with an abundance of reflections, practices, and resources. The emerging work of the ISB already offered a range of opportunities to practise contextual Bible re-reading, so while we made use of CEBI’s resources, we paid particular attention to local South African practice. I use the term “re-reading” deliberately, for we quickly realised that in South Africa, we were working with ordinary Bible reading communities which already had a definitive, even if theologically over-determined, understanding of the biblical text and/as story. We had to locate our contextual-liberation Bible re-reading alongside their own reception history of the Bible.

During 1990 the ISB participated in and facilitated each of three distinctive biblical studies-based methods of biblical re-reading within the southern African context: socio-historical, literary-narrative, and thematic-semiotic. The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) had invited the ISB to produce a series of contextual Bible

studies on Exodus for the launch of their Pastoral Plan for Transformation in Church and Society (Pastoral Plan) in May 1990 (Van der Water 1998, 141–147), at which the ISB facilitated one of the Exodus Bible study series, modelling both facilitation and contextual Bible re-reading method (ISB 1990, 4–5, 35–39). Each of the Exodus contextual Bible studies was produced by “a local ISB Bible study group in Pietermaritzburg” (ISB 1990, 1, 7–8), which met regularly, made up of colleagues from the ISB’s Management Committee, academic staff, theological students, local pastoral agents and community-based activists. Within this safe, creative space, we experimented with CEBI’s socio-historical methods, constructing a Bible study, for example, on Exodus 1 and 5 using “The Four Sides Method” of Gorgulho, in which we invited participants to reflect on the social, political, economic, and religious/ideological systems evident in the Egypt of the text, to draw their four-sides analysis, and then to discuss the similarities and differences between this ancient biblical system and the South African system. Draft versions of these Bible studies were then used in a range of local church and community groups, before being revised and finally published (Nürnberg 1992). These contextual Bible studies followed the CEBI inspired emphasis on socio-historical method, offering readers resources which located the biblical text in its ancient Near Eastern context and questions that facilitated readers recognising potential resonances between ancient context and contemporary context (see also ICT 1989; ISB 1992).

The ISB was also invited, during this time period, to work with the Ilimo Community Project (Ilimo) in Amawoti, “an informal peri-urban shack settlement within Durban” (Philpott 1993, 19; ISB 1990, 3, 23–24). Graham Philpott, who had joined us on our Brazilian visit, lived and worked in Amawoti, and among the projects he worked with was a Bible study group which he facilitated together with community leaders (Philpott 1993, 11, 19; ISB 1990, 23). The Bible re-reading method used was very similar to that of CEBI in the north of Brazil. Emphasis was placed on a local contextual starting point, which was then used to discern resonating thematic-semiotic dimensions of the biblical text (see the Bible studies in Philpott 1993, 136–198). The local ISB Bible study group in Pietermaritzburg experimented with this method as well, using images I had brought back from Brazil. CEBI often used drawings of local realities as a contextual starting point for their Bible studies, which were then juxtaposed with a potentially resonant biblical text, inviting participants to construct thematic-semiotic connections between context and biblical text.

An UCCSA-type Bible study and an Amawoti-type Bible study were each used in the ISB’s culminating workshop consultation at the end of 1990, “The Bible and Social Transformation: Liberating Bible Study with Grassroots Communities” (ISB 1990, 4, 40–42). This workshop, jointly planned and facilitated by the ISB and Ilimo, brought together as many of the organisations we had consulted throughout southern Africa as possible, providing an opportunity for us to use the see-judge-act process, as was the custom of each of these related contextual theologies (ISB 1990, 2, 18), to analyse our southern African contexts (see), reflect on the justice of our contexts against a biblical

vision of God's kin-dom (judge) and then plan together on how we might respond to change our contexts (act) (ISB 1990, 40–42).

Alongside these two CEBI-like Bible re-reading methods, we also began to use a more overtly literary-narrative method. In 1989, Jonathan Draper and I facilitated a contextual Bible study on Mark 10:17–22 among the Anglican parishes of Pietermaritzburg, using an overtly literary-narrative set of Bible study questions (Draper and West 1989, 49–50). Careful attention to the literary-narrative detail of the text clearly offered ordinary readers access to biblical text in ways that required a slower and more careful re-reading. Encouraged by this work, we continued using literary-narrative method during 1990, alongside or in conjunction with the other two methodological emphases.

While there was considerable academic debate by socially engaged biblical scholars about the methods appropriate to biblical liberation hermeneutics, the work of ISB required that we understand how ordinary readers understood the strengths and weaknesses of each of these three methodological emphases. Recognising, within the ecumenical networks we collaborated with, that the ISB's particular contribution to contextual Bible re-reading included an overt use of interpretive method, we constructed a series of three Bible studies in which we invited the local communities we worked with during 1990–1991 to evaluate each of the three re-reading methods (West 1991b, 91–93).

We used a CEBI-like thematic-semiotic, in-front-of-the-text type Bible study on Matthew 6:19–34, using questions to probe the drawing we provided of a person with glasses, which had one clear lens and one dark lens, respectively enabling the person to see wealth but preventing the person from seeing poverty (West 1991b, 110). Juxtaposed with this drawing were questions about Matthew 6:19–34, which probed the text's and Jesus' understanding of wealth. We also used one of the Exodus, socio-historical behind-the-text type Bible studies (West 1991b, 107–108), re-reading Exodus 2:1–10 alongside the ancient Near Eastern story of Sargon, inviting participants to understand how the Exodus story had been used in a later time in the history of ancient Israel, when the Hebrews were under the domination of the Assyrian empire, yearning for another Moses "through whom God would liberate them." Finally, completing the set of three method-focused Bible studies, we used the Bible study Draper and I had designed in which we probed the literary-narrative dimensions of Mark 10:17–22 (West 1991b, 109), inviting participants through a series of questions to re-read the text again and again with careful attention to how the narrative detail constructed a theological argument against systemic wealth.

In each case, we summarised for the participants the method that was being used, in three concise points, and then invited them to comment in an open-ended manner on the "strengths and weaknesses" of each method (West 1991b, 95–98). Interrogating Bible re-reading method became a distinctive feature of the ISB's contribution to contextual theology. The writing and publication of the manual-like book *Contextual Bible Study*

(West 1993) consolidated this contribution and also the designation “Contextual Bible Study.”

Contextual Bible Study

The book *Contextual Bible Study*, published in 1993 locally through Cluster Publications, begins with a quotation from the revised second edition of *The Kairos Document*: “The cry of many Christians is that the crisis in South Africa ‘impels us to return to the Bible and to search the Word of God for a message that is relevant to what we are experiencing in South Africa today’” (West 1993, 7; citing Kairos 1986, 17 §4.1). The second revised edition of *The Kairos Document* foregrounds the importance of the Bible, implicit in the first edition but amplified in the second edition (Kairos 1986, 35, explanatory note 16). Indeed, the phrase “to return to the Bible” is placed in italics for emphasis in *The Kairos Document*. CBS is located quite specifically in this book as a form of Contextual Theology, within the trajectory of the ICT and *The Kairos Document*, though there are resonances with many other forms of contextual theology. This alignment with the Contextual Theology of the ICT is reiterated through the endorsement on the back cover by Albert Nolan.

Contextual Bible Study has been reprinted many times, but the book has not been revised. The book reflects a moment in the conceptual history of CBS, and so has been left to represent this formative moment. Significantly, the phrase “contextual Bible study” is not in upper case in the text. At the time, we identified CBS as one form of contextual Bible re-reading among many. Three factors are significant in the shift to the use of CBS as a proper noun. First, the publication of *Contextual Bible Study* places considerable emphasis on the role of biblical studies method in contextual Bible reading. Though always a feature of other contextual Bible reading processes, whether those of the YCW (Dumortier 1983; Lafont 1991) or the ICT (ICT n.d., 9–10), *Contextual Bible Study* was particularly overt about this dimension of contextual Bible reading, identifying an accompanying and facilitatory role for the socially engaged biblical scholar (West 1993, 8–9, 17–20) and demonstrating the diverse roles of different biblical studies methods (West 1993, 23–51, 62–74). Gradually, the form of contextual Bible study being used by the ISB became known as CBS. Second, as sister contextual theology institutions began to reconstitute themselves (or close) after 1994, their distinctive forms of contextual Bible reading disappeared (Ujamaa 2010). Contextual Bible reading, therefore, became more readily associated with the ISB’s (and later the Ujamaa Centre’s) form of contextual Bible study, CBS. Third, the institutional location of the ISB within a university and the commitment of the socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians associated with the ISB to publish academic reflection on CBS, from the very beginning, established CBS as a specific form of contextual biblical interpretation (Draper 1991; Cochrane 1996; West 1991b; Wittenberg 1993), laying an academic foundation for what would become a distinctive sub-discipline of biblical studies (see for example Cornwall and Nixon 2011; Esala 2016; Webster 2017).

The conceptual shape of CBS was summarised in *Contextual Bible Study* in terms of four “commitments” (West 1993, 11), though it was made clear to readers that “this description and analysis of the contextual Bible study is not final and prescribed. It is a process, and you are a part of that process” (West 1993, 12). The four commitments would expand over the years to become six commitments or values (West 2015), but these formative four commitments conveyed the conceptual shape of CBS clearly. First, there was a commitment “to read the Bible from the perspective of the South African context, particularly from the perspective of the poor and oppressed” (West 1993, 12–14). This required a second commitment, addressed directly to the socially engaged biblical scholar who was the primary addressee of the book (West 1993, 8), namely a commitment “to read the Bible in community with others, particularly with those from contexts different from our own” (West 1993, 14–17). Here was a recognition that the socially engaged biblical scholar must interpret the Bible “with” others, specifically voices and bodies “from below.” The third commitment, “to read the Bible critically” (West 1993, 117–20), emphasised the importance of biblical studies methods, locating a place for the “trained reader” alongside “the ordinary reader” (West 1993, 14–17). The fourth and final commitment pointed to the purpose of CBS, namely personal and systemic social transformation (West 1993, 21–22). The next 30 years would deepen understanding of the conceptual shape of CBS, but these four commitments and the formative conceptual shape they provided would remain a constant reference point.

The early years of CBS’s work were located within South Africa’s particular contextual reality, what the South African Communist Party designated “colonialism of a special type” (SACP 2012, 5), settler-colonial apartheid “racial capitalism” (Sebidi 1986, 31–35). *Contextual Bible Study* represents this social location (West 1993, 77–84), but also demonstrates the usefulness of CBS to gender concerns (West 1993, 51–59) and African cultural concerns (West 1993, 60–70). In these respects, CBS indicated its capacity to engage with post-apartheid contextual concerns, creating opportunities for CBS’s work after liberation.

Though *Contextual Bible Study* acknowledges and assumes a Bible that is itself inherently a site of struggle (Mofokeng 1988, 37; Mosala 1989, 185), as is the church and theology (ICT n.d., 1, 3, 5–6; Kairos 1985, 4–5), CBS emphasised the presence of a significant “resistance theology” (Wittenberg 2007) in the Bible (West 1993, 32–33). The post-liberation period, however, gradually led to the decline of “prophetic theology” and the prevalence of “church theology,” to use terms constituted by *The Kairos Document* (Kairos 1985). It became necessary, therefore, for CBS to align itself more closely with South African Black Theology’s understanding of the Bible as a site of struggle, moving away from *The Kairos Document*’s assumption of the Bible as essentially a liberation-prophetic sacred text (West 2000, 2012).

Conclusion

The action-reflection praxis of CBS requires routine reflection on the conceptual infrastructure that shapes CBS's emancipatory practice. This article draws on the documentary resources produced through such reflection, locating CBS alongside the array of contextual theologies of the 1980s and early 1990s, focusing on South African contextual theologies, but recognising too the formative role of CEBI in Brazil.

The period 1988–1993 constitutes a useful delimitation of the formative years of CBS in which its conceptual foundations were established. A distinctive feature of this form of contextual Bible reading is its focus on biblical interpretive method. *How* we re-read when we do contextual theology has been the enduring question of both this formative period and the 30 years since. Reflection on the process of CBS has generated an international network of contextual Bible reading practitioners (West 2015; De Wit and Dyk 2015) and a sub-discipline within biblical studies (Riches et al. 2010; Cornwall and Nixon 2011; Mainwaring 2014). My article documents the early history of this particular contextual biblical and theological trajectory.

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