

*African Biblical Interpretation as
Participatory Community-Based Development:
The Praxis of The Ujamaa Centre*

*A Interpretação Bíblica Africana como desenvolvimento
participativo de Base Comunitária:*

A Práxis do Centro Ujamaa

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Abstract

The Ujamaa Centre engages in community-based participatory biblical interpretation, offering theo-theological resources for participatory community-based transformation. Faith is often a vital component of African identity and community. Yet the Bible, biblical interpretation, and African Christianities are frequently used by churches, government, and the private sector to constrain participatory community-based change. These institutional sites control 'development' initiatives and practices, offering only invited space to poor and marginalised communities. The Contextual Bible Study (CBS) praxis of the Ujamaa Centre re-reads the Bible with organized formations of the poor and marginalised, offering invigorated space within which to reconceptualize both the Bible and participatory community-based development. Through this invigorated space, local organized groups forge forms of interpretive resilience and interpretive resistance, generating resources with which to contend within invited development space. This process invigorates that space and creates the potential for participatory community-based development within invited space. Our essay reflects on the relationship between community-based participatory biblical interpretation and participatory community-based development, drawing on more than thirty-five years of the Ujamaa Centre's praxis.

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Keywords: Contextual Bible Study; Ujamaa Centre; participatory development; liberation hermeneutics; African biblical interpretation; social space.

Resumo

O Centro Ujamaa engaja-se na interpretação bíblica participativa de base comunitária, oferecendo recursos ideoteológicos para a transformação participativa de base comunitária. A fé é frequentemente um componente vital da identidade e da comunidade africanas. No entanto, a Bíblia, a interpretação bíblica e as cristandades africanas são frequentemente usadas por igrejas, governo e setor privado para restringir mudanças participativas de base comunitária. Esses locais institucionais controlam as iniciativas e práticas de “desenvolvimento”, oferecendo apenas espaço convidado às comunidades pobres e marginalizadas. A práxis do Estudo Bíblico Contextual (EBC) do Centro Ujamaa relê a Bíblia com formações organizadas de pobres e marginalizados, oferecendo um espaço vigorizado dentro do qual se pode reconceituar tanto a Bíblia quanto o desenvolvimento participativo de base comunitária. Por meio desse espaço vigorizado, grupos organizados locais forjam formas de resiliência interpretativa e resistência interpretativa, gerando recursos com os quais competir dentro do espaço de desenvolvimento convidado. Esse processo vigoriza esse espaço e cria o potencial para o desenvolvimento participativo de base comunitária dentro do espaço inventado. Nosso ensaio reflete sobre a relação entre a interpretação bíblica participativa de base comunitária e o desenvolvimento participativo de base comunitária, baseando-se em mais de trinta e cinco anos de práxis do Centro Ujamaa.

Palavras-chave: Estudo Bíblico Contextual; Centro Ujamaa; desenvolvimento participativo; hermenêutica da libertação; interpretação bíblica africana; espaço social.

Resumen

El Centro Ujamaa participa en la interpretación bíblica participativa de base comunitaria, ofreciendo recursos ideoteológicos para la transformación participativa de base comunitaria. La fe es a menudo un componente vital de la identidad y la comunidad africanas. Sin embargo, la Biblia, la interpretación bíblica y las cristiandades africanas son frecuentemente utilizadas por las iglesias, el gobierno y el sector privado para restringir el cambio participativo de base comunitaria. Estos sitios institucionales controlan las iniciativas y prácticas de „desarrollo“, ofreciendo solo espacio invitado a las comunidades pobres y marginadas. La praxis del Estudio Bíblico Contextual (EBC) del Centro Ujamaa relea la Biblia con formaciones organizadas de pobres y marginados, ofreciendo un espacio vigorizado dentro del cual se puede reconceptualizar tanto la Biblia como el desarrollo participativo de base comunitaria. A través de este espacio vigorizado, los grupos organizados locales forjan formas de resiliencia y resistencia interpretativas, generando recursos con los cuales contender dentro del espacio de desarrollo invitado. Este proceso vigoriza ese espacio y crea el potencial para el desarrollo participativo de base comunitaria dentro del espacio inventado. Nuestro ensayo reflexiona sobre la relación entre la interpretación bíblica participativa de base comunitaria y el desarrollo participativo de base comunitaria, basándose en más de treinta y cinco años de praxis del Centro Ujamaa.

Palabras clave: Estudio Bíblico Contextual; Centro Ujamaa; desarrollo participativo; hermenéutica de la liberación; interpretación bíblica africana; espacio social.

Introduction

‘Contextual Bible Study’ (CBS) emerged as a biblical liberation methodology within the work of the Ujamaa Centre in the late 1980s in South Africa during the struggle against colonialism and apartheid. CBS was summoned by local communities of the poor and marginalised who yearned to hear God speak during apartheid violence. The churches of the poor tended to proclaim, “Church Theology” (Kairos Theologians, 1985), an apolitical individualistic form of theology. Local African communities of the poor and marginalised yearned for a “Prophetic Theology” (Kairos Theologians, 1985), a theology which openly engaged with the interlocking systems of oppression of apartheid.

CBS emerged slowly, through community-based praxis, shaped by different forms of liberation theology. South African Black Theology and South African Contextual Theology played a particularly significant role in constituting CBS methodology, alongside Feminist Theology (West, 1995, 2024), as did the community-based work of Centro de Estudos Bíblicos (CEBI) in Brazil (West, 2022a). However, it was local organised communities of the poor and marginalised who gave CBS its distinctive shape, moving from the realities of a particular community (*See*), through a re-reading of the Bible (*Judge*), to community-based social action (*Act*).

This article begins with a brief analysis of the Contextual Bible Study of the Ujamaa Centre, locating CBS within the realities of the local communities who summoned it into being, and the formative liberation theologies which shaped it. Central to our argument is a typology of social spaces—*invited space* (controlled by dominant institutions), *invigorated space* (a collaborative realm CBS helps create for critical re-reading), and *invented space* (transformative space created and controlled by the community itself)—which will frame our analysis throughout.

Community-Based Participatory Biblical Interpretation

The See-Judge-Act framework gives a distinctly worker-based liberation theology orientation to CBS (Sands, 2018), locating CBS within an economic analysis and guiding it through each constituent process. Economic systems of oppression are central to most forms of liberation theology, especially those which have contributed to CBS: South African Black Theology, South African Contextual Theology, Tanzanian Ujamaa Theology, and Latin American Liberation Theology. “Racial capitalism” was identified by Black Theology as the fundamental intersecting system of race and class oppression within colonial

apartheid (Sebidi, 1986), and this was the dominant contextual reality of the Ujamaa Centre's early work (West, Zwane, & Van der Walt, 2025b).

Racial capitalism was the reality ('See') from within which CBS emerged as a Bible re-reading praxis, though other related intersecting systems of oppression soon summoned CBS work, including colonial and African patriarchies (which generate gender-based violence), colonial and African epistemologies and theologies of retribution (which stigmatise those living with HIV, those with disabilities, and even the unemployed), and colonial and African hetero-patriarchies (which discriminate and perpetrate violence against LGBTIQ+ people) (West, Van der Walt, & Zwane, Forthcoming).

What is distinctive about CBS is that we understand the 'Judge' process to interrogate not only the interlocking systems of oppression which constitute the lived reality of the poor and marginalised, but also to interrogate the interlocking systems of oppression which constitute the Bible and any biblical text. South African Black Theology has taught us that the Bible is itself intrinsically a site of ideological and theological contestation. Biblical texts are, argues Itumeleng Mosala, "products, records, and sites of social, historical, cultural, gender, racial, and ideological struggles" and so "they radically and indelibly bear the mark of their origins and history" (Mosala, 1989, p. 20). CBS strives to hear the voices of ancient communities of the poor and marginalised within a particular biblical text, amidst the dominant voices which have co-opted them into the final canonical form of the Bible.

The 'Judge' process within CBS begins with the lived reality of a particular community of the poor and marginalised, recognizing the intersection of economic and other systems of oppression, and allowing this lived reality to discern a potentially useful biblical text. CBS begins by engaging with a local community's understanding of this text, before slowing the interpretive process by re-reading the biblical text in small groups, using, first, literary-narrative participatory questions, and second, socio-historical participatory questions (West, 2011). These biblical studies methods interrogate the detail of the biblical text, offering organised communities of the poor and marginalised potentially useful detail with which to engage. As we re-read the biblical text which the community's lived reality has discerned as potentially useful, we gradually begin to hear the ancient co-opted and suppressed voices within the text. It is these voices that become the dialogue partners for a contemporary community-based group. These ancient voices affirm the struggle of the contemporary group and offer resources for both interpretive resilience and interpretive resistance (West, 2018).

While interpretive resilience is a significant contribution of CBS—affirming the dignity and agency of the poor and marginalised and enabling them to wrest the Bible from the control of their churches—the primary purpose of CBS is interpretive resistance and particular forms of participatory community-based action ('Act'). This hermeneutic of suspicion, which seeks the absent

voices within the text, is not an end in itself. It is the crucial first step that leads from interpretive resilience to interpretive resistance, and ultimately, to the participatory community-based development we explore in the following sections.

The Bible as a Site of Struggle

While many forms of African biblical interpretation work with the final form of the Bible (Mbuvi, 2022), the South African Black biblical hermeneutics of the 1980s, like feminist biblical hermeneutics of that era (Fiorenza, 1983), identified the final form of the Bible as itself a problem (Mosala, 1989). It was not only biblical interpretation that was a site of struggle (Mofokeng, 1988); the Bible itself intrinsically was a site of struggle. While the Ujamaa Centre appreciates Andrew Mbuvi's arguments for the presence of the final form in the lives of African hearers and readers of the Bible, we are persuaded by Mosala's hermeneutic of absence (Mosala, 1989). The redactional processes of text production, Mosala argues, are processes of ideological co-optation, through which ancient, marginalised voices are elided, though never fully eradicated.

Recovering an Economic Remnant: 1 Kings 12:1-16

In a recent CBS on 1 Kings 12:1-16 (or 18), for example, we work with a text which is clearly about economic contestation, but which is disrupted by later interpolated redactional commentary. In our CBS we use the Masoretic version (1 Kings 12:1-16) only as an introduction to a Septuagintal variant version of the narrative in 3 Reigns 12:24p-t. The final canonical form is then disregarded. The CBS focuses on what is almost certainly an earlier version of the narrative, in which there is no interpolated religious or ethnic explanation for the division of the united monarchy. The reason for the division in 3 Reigns 12:24p-t is clearly and unambiguously economic exploitation. While the place of this variant among the other versions is a matter of some complexity (Schenker, 2000; Treballe Barrera, 2012), what is likely is that 3 Reigns 12:24p-t represents a different and earlier Hebrew source-text version of this important historical and theological story (West, 2022b). The Greek text preserves this version. Our CBS recovers this absent text and returns it to contemporary faith-based communities who are engaged in economic struggles, and who discern resonances between ancient forms of political-elite economic extraction and what in South Africa we have referred to as political-elite 'state capture' (West, 2023). Within the CBS we are quite overt about the unstable canonical final form of the Bibles which Africans use (West, 2023). We are also overt about the kinds of socio-historical economic contestations that produced this text and its sister variants. Canonical biblical text is invited space (Zwane, 2020, 2025), ideologically and theologically controlled by the dominant sectors of society across the formation of the canon (Deist, 1982; Mosala, 1989).

Hearing Labour’s Voice: Matthew 20:1-16

In a related New Testament example, the Ujamaa Centre has constructed a CBS in which we offer organised groups of the unemployed an opportunity to re-read Matthew 20:1-16 as a parable told by Jesus about economic exploitation (Herzog, 1994), rather than Matthew’s theologically redacted version in which the focus is on ethnic and religious concerns (West & Zwane, 2013; West, 2022c). Matthew co-opts a parable about economic exclusion and reuses it to proclaim religious and ethnic inclusion. But the economic systems of oppression remain partially visible. Contemporary unemployed youth recognize the mechanisms of economic exploitation in this parable, confirming Mosala’s claim that “there are enough contradictions” within biblical texts “to enable eyes that are hermeneutically trained in the struggle for liberation today to observe the kin struggles of the oppressed and exploited of the biblical communities” (Mosala, 1986, p. 192).

Such CBS participate “in the struggles of the [biblical] texts”, empowering CBS participants “to participate in the struggles of contemporary communities of faith” (Mosala, 1989, p. 40). Recognizing that the Bible itself intrinsically is a site of ideological and theological contestation enables communities of the poor and marginalised to understand that there is more than one voice within any biblical text. CBS ‘judges’ both the lived realities of the poor and marginalised we work with and the lived realities of the poor and marginalised within and behind the biblical text.

Hearing Tamar’s Voice: 2Samuel 13:1-22

Hearing Tamar’s voice, for example, within a biblical text that is concerned about the male matters of monarchic succession (2 Samuel 13:1-22), enables women survivors of gender-based violence to stand with Tamar as she speaks out against male violence. Hearing Tamar’s voice affirms the capacity of participants to hear the biblical voices that their churches disregard. This is interpretive resilience—knowing that there are other voices within scripture. Mobilizing among women to use Tamar’s neglected biblical voice for social change is interpretive resistance (West & Zondi-Mabizela, 2004). Such interpretive resistance has the capacity to enable participatory community-based development (West, 2019).

Participatory Community-Based Development

The early work of the Ujamaa Centre was done within the ambit of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The anti-apartheid struggle was the praxis that shaped the community-based biblical interpretation of the Ujamaa Centre in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With liberation in 1994, the CBS-

based biblical interpretation of the Ujamaa Centre was shaped by the socialist Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of the liberation government formed by the tripartite alliance of the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the South African Communist Party (SACP). However, from 1996 it became clear to the worker movement and community-based organizations of the poor and marginalised that the socialist version of the RDP had been usurped by a pro-capitalist version (Bond, 2005; Seekings & Nattrass, 2006). This macro-economic shift has led the Ujamaa Centre to focus more fully on local community-based understandings of 'development'. Government understandings of 'development' have become invited, capitalist-controlled space.

By 'local community-based' the Ujamaa Centre means organised groups of the poor and marginalised, with an emphasis on economic poverty, but inclusive of other forms of marginalization, such as women survivors of gender-based violence, communities struggling for rural and urban land, people living with HIV, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people struggling for their human rights, etc. The Ujamaa Centre recognizes the array of interlocking systems of oppression which generate poverty and marginalization, and so works with an intersectional approach, foregrounding economic systems of oppression.

By 'participatory community-based development' the Ujamaa Centre works with the understanding of 'development' as a process of involvement of all groups of people, but specifically the poor and marginalised in a community, in decision-making and planning (Rahman, 1993; Schuftan, 1996; Martin, 2003; Parfitt, 2004; Rieger & Das, 2025). Participatory community-based development is a process rather than an event and requires various stages of 'participation' that lead to community-based social transformation (Zwane, 2025).

First, the starting point of the process is organization formation—the formation of organised groups within a local community guided by a common community-based reality and purpose. Organised groups create social spaces of critical reflection on the lived and embodied reality of their community. Second is the process of capacity building for the organised group in order to challenge the control of dominant governmental, business, and ecclesial sectors, and so to address pertinent developmental challenges within the local community. This is important because, in most cases, it is the government, the private sector (business), and the church that invite communities into their controlled and dominated 'development' spaces. However, capacitated organised groups can disrupt these controlled and dominated social spaces. Third is the process of an implementation plan, a programme of action, by the organised group in order to transform the controlled and dominated social spaces of government, business, and the church that undermine or under-represent the local community, particularly the poor and marginalised. Fourth is the process of forms of transformative

change in the lives and actions of people within the local community, particularly for the poor and marginalised.

This four-fold process is premised on people's power and agency to transform the conditions of underdevelopment and create opportunities for sustainable participatory community-based development. Significantly, the Ujamaa Centre has contributed to each of the four processes with community-based groups (Zwane, 2025), making it clear that the Ujamaa Centre understands 'biblical interpretation' in general and CBS in particular within a broader understanding of participatory community-based development praxis.

In our work with people living with HIV, for example, our collaboration began by simply offering space—literal space within our offices—to those who were being sent home from our local hospital "to die". This safe and inclusive space gave those who were newly diagnosed with HIV an opportunity to meet each other, to share a meal, and to engage in conversation. From within this invigorated space (Zwane, 2020), this loosely organised group noticed our work with other organised groups, including women survivors of gender-based violence and unemployed youth. They invited us to work with them within their embodied lived realities. We encouraged those living with HIV to form themselves into an organised group, which they did, constituting the first of the 'Siyaphila' ('We are alive'; 'We are well') HIV support groups (West, 2003; West & Zengele, 2006). We were delighted when they took the initiative and invited us to do CBS work with them, guiding us in how we might use the Bible with them and enabling us to serve many others living with HIV, through decades of HIV work (West, 2017). Through the affirmation and agency of our collaborative CBS work, Siyaphila became a regional network, raising funds for their own development projects, within a governmental and ecclesial context which stigmatised their lived reality, condemning them to death rather than working with them for life (Stooss, 2002; Zengele, 2023).

The CBS process provides resources for participatory community-based development through a structured process of participation that facilitates critical engagement with lived social realities, through a re-reading of the biblical text with organised group formations in the community. A good example of CBS forging an overt connection between CBS and participatory community-based development is our recent CBS work on Ruth 1:22-2:23 with diverse community-based groups, in which we are overt about the contestation of space within the book of Ruth and our local contexts, and in which we introduce the notions of invited, invigorated, and invented development space (West, Zwane, & Carlos, 2025a). CBS processes create opportunities for the participants to identify kindred discourses of resistance within or behind their sacred text—a sacred text which has been reclaimed from the control of their churches (West & Zengele, 2006) and from the control of the Bible's final form (Mosala, 1989). Ancient

voices of struggle combine with contemporary voices of struggle to raise their corporate ‘voice’ concerning the developmental challenges in the community.

Voice, Space, and Social Change

Recognizing that there are ‘other’ voices within biblical texts besides the dominant voices appropriated by our churches is a significant recognition. CBS contributes to this recognition, working with organised groups to forge “invigorated space” within the “invited space” of their churches (Zwane, 2020; West, Zwane, & Carlos, 2023b), leading to interpretive resilience and forms of “annunciation”, which Linden West explains as vocalized “agentic encounters with otherness in existentially significant forms of learning” (L. West, 2021, p. 425). CBS creates invigorated space, challenging not only the churches’ control of biblical interpretation, but also governmental and business sector control of local development projects. The experienced reality of invigorated space facilitates the participation of the poor and marginalised, freeing them of the constraints of invited ‘development’ space controlled by government, business, and the church. Within this invigorated space, which CBS processes collaborate in constructing, the Bible study component of CBS invigorates the invited space of the Bible, enabling community-based annunciation as the participants together forge a language “by which the oppressions, suffering and human possibility in the world find a voice” (L. West, 2021, p. 435).

Interpretive resilience may lead beyond hearing the cry of other voices within the biblical text to forging an alliance with these voices and the voices of the community for contemporary social transformation. Here annunciation leads to “denunciation, a spirit of critique and fundamental questioning of the established order of things” (L. West, 2021, p. 438), whether they be the forms of development controlled by government agencies, the business sector, or the institutional church. Interpretive resilience leads to interpretive resistance, which leads to the imagining and creating of “invented space”—community-controlled space—within which true participatory community-based development takes place (Zwane, 2020). Denunciation, as a vocalized form of resistance, may then lead organised groups of the poor and marginalised to the formation of their own invented space and to forms of social transformation.

In the next section we reflect on CBS-based examples of the shift from interpretive resilience to interpretive resistance, from annunciation to denunciation to transformation, from invited space to invigorated space to invented space. Pivotal to this foregrounding of voice is the invigorated space facilitated by CBS (West, Zwane, & Carlos, 2023b).

Interlocking Systems of Oppression: Four Case Studies

The Contextual Bible Study praxis of the Ujamaa Centre was forged within the interlocking systems of apartheid South Africa. “The struggle” (Sebidi, 1986) was against “the system” (Nolan, 1988), while recognizing that “the system” was a compound noun, incorporating “interrelated” or “intertwined” (Sebidi, 1986) or “interlocking” (Combahee River Collective, 1977) or “intersecting” (Crenshaw, 1989) systems of oppression. Each of these metaphors and their bodies of theory understand that “oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 307). This quotation, taken from Anna Carastathis’ useful analysis of intersectionality theory and interlocking systems theory (Carastathis, 2014, 2016), emphasises the anti-racist Black feminist origins of each.

Each of the examples which follows have been chosen to demonstrate an organised community’s interpretive resistance, leading to potentially invented spaces within which to engage in participatory community-based transformation. Each recognizes particular instances of interlocking systems of oppression.

Case Study 1: Land and Economic Justice

Our first example comes from a collaborative project in 2003 with the Church Land Programme and the Rural Network (West & Ndlazi, 2010). Together we selected the African woodcut by Azaria Mbatha to guide us in CBS work on Genesis 41:46-57 and 47:13-26 (Church Land Programme, 2006; West & Ndlazi, 2010). These two related textual units offer rather different voices to the family-based narrative portions of the Joseph story. Here is a story of systemic economic and political exploitation, led by Joseph.

The participants immediately recognized the resonances between the economic and political systems Joseph used to oppress the people and the oppressive systems of the apartheid state (racial capitalism) and the post-apartheid state (“democratic capitalism” (Terreblanche, 2002)), within which land was and is central. Land, both urban and rural, remains a site of struggle in post-apartheid South Africa (West & Ndlazi, 2010), and so this CBS was well received throughout the communities in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa in which it was facilitated.

Among the actions planned by rural groups was an initiative by the Nkosi Vukanathi Land Committee, made up mainly of women, who had been enduring several attempts by a neighboring white farmer to evict them from their homes, demolish their homes, and impound their cattle (West & Ndlazi, 2010). The group used this CBS to mobilise other villages to participate in their local struggle for land. When invited to reflect on the impact of this CBS on their communities, a crucial response was that CBS “promotes working together by

the community members” (West & Ndlazi, 2010, p. 185). In a context in which villages remain divided politically and culturally, this CBS facilitated invigorated space in which these communities could collaborate and mobilise together.

Among the joint actions these communities organised was a meeting with officials in the provincial government of KwaZulu-Natal to discuss their concerns about land. “When their delegation was met by an ill-equipped and dismissive junior delegation from the provincial government office that did not take their concerns seriously, the community’s delegation reconvened and decided to embark on a public protest march” (West & Ndlazi, 2010, p. 186). CBS enabled invigorated community-based space, within which announcement led to denunciation and then to transformation within the invented space of a community-controlled protest march.

Another outcome of this work was the insistence by the community-based groups that we should not use the term ‘Bible study’ for our collaborative work because what we were doing was not like the ‘Bible study’ of their churches! They insisted on using the abbreviation ‘CBS’ as an alternative. The communities recognised that CBS was a liberation theology process. This is an example of interpretive resilience, understanding that the Bible speaks with more than one voice. [*Posible espacio para incluir una cita directa de un participante sobre este cambio de denominación*].

Case Study 2: Confronting Gender-Based Violence

Our second example comes from our gender-based violence work. The intersection of colonial and African patriarchies and their perpetration of violence against women summoned the Ujamaa Centre to construct a CBS on 2 Samuel 13:1-22. We facilitated this CBS for the first time in 1996, and then in 1999 a local United Reformed Church group in KwaZulu-Natal, made up mainly of young women, having done the Tamar CBS, challenged the Ujamaa Centre to use this CBS as part of a gender-based violence campaign. The next year the Tamar Campaign was launched (West & Zondi-Mabizela, 2004). Young women used the invigorated space of the Tamar CBS to mobilise and invent a space in which a range of resources could be used alongside the Tamar CBS to equip local communities with biblical and theological capacity to contend with gender-based violence, masculinity (West, 2010), HIV, and economic justice (West & Zondi-Mabizela, 2004).

The Tamar Campaign has had a significant impact in South Africa (and around the world). The Tamar Campaign has provided safe and brave sacred space (West, Zwane, & Carlos, 2023b), particularly for rural women, where patriarchy “shuts down or attempts to control the places and spaces in which women meet, preventing women from sharing and exploring with each other their common realities” (West, Zondi-Mabizela, Maluleke, Khumalo, Matsepe,

& Naidoo, 2004, p. 38). Among the documented impacts of the Tamar Campaign has been the increased interest of men in the Campaign (and Ujamaa Centre work with men (West, 2013a)). More importantly, the Tamar Campaign has provided the opportunity for women, both young and old, to carefully announce and share their experiences of sexual abuse among each other within the safe and brave sacred space of Bible study, and to seek counselling (West et al., 2004). This need for counselling, which emerges in every Tamar CBS, has led the Ujamaa Centre into invented space. We have developed a project related to the Tamar Campaign in which we train a community-identified person in basic counselling and referral skills (Ujamaa Centre, 2012; West, 2013b).

Case Study 3: LGBTIQA+ Inclusion and Resistance

Our third example engages with the intersection of colonial and African hetero-patriarchies, as well as Africa-related neo-colonial economies of extraction (Mezzadra, 2024), what we refer to as econo-hetero-patriarchies. Since 2013 the Ujamaa Centre has been working with a local organised LGBTIQA+ group, the Uthingo Network (uthingonetwork.org.za). Among the many CBS projects, we have worked on together (see Van der Walt, 2024), we will reflect briefly here on two related CBS, one on Genesis 19-18 (in that order) and one on Galatians 1.6-2.14, 3.27-28.

Genesis 19 is a standard homophobic proof-text. Our queer colleagues invited us to engage with this text, trusting that we would re-read it in invigorated, prophetic, and redemptive ways. We began with Genesis 19, offering a close and careful literary-narrative CBS. This careful and close reading of the narrative detail made it clear to the queer participants that this biblical text was not about homosexuality, but about male rape by heterosexual men. We then re-read Genesis 19 from the beginning of the story in Genesis 18 (West, Zwane, & Van der Walt, 2021). This extended story, participants agreed, was about hospitality (both rural (Genesis 18) and urban (Genesis 19)), not homosexuality. Indeed, one participant explained, “The church is like Sodom, just as the men of Sodom wanted to subject others to their power, so the church wants to subject us to its power. Re-reading this text reminds us to question each and every text; God himself will come down to judge the church, just as God himself came down to judge Sodom!” (West, Zwane, & Van der Walt, 2021, p. 15). Here this participant articulates clearly the importance of interpretive resilience in his life of faith.

Our CBS on Galatians followed our work on Genesis 19-18. We were encouraged by our queer colleagues to offer CBS resources that interpreted biblical texts which were not usually associated with ‘homosexuality’. Our early CBS work on Galatians 3:27-28, concerning racial and gender inclusion, had generated a response from the local church with which we were working which

asked whether the inclusive theology of Paul’s argument in Galatians might be extended to homosexual inclusion. So we began to work with Galatians with our queer partners (West, Van der Walt, Zwane, Hall, Sithole, & Sibisi, 2023a). The challenge of Galatians is that it is a didactic epistle in terms of its genre, rather than a narrative story. We therefore focussed on the two stories Paul tells within his letter—the story of Titus (2:1-9) and the story of Cephas (2:11-14)—from which Paul develops the inclusive theology of 3:27-28, extending his concerns about ethnic inclusivity to gender and class. We worked with this CBS in various local community settings with our Uthingo Network partners, but the most innovative invigorated space was doing this CBS with pairings of LGBTIQ+ African Christians and their church leaders from five African countries (South Africa, Mozambique, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda) (West et al., 2023a). As is the case in almost all our CBS work, this CBS was also explicit about economic matters, including a CBS question about Paul’s inclusive economic theology (2:10).

These two CBS have enabled “difficult conversations” within faith communities, including our churches (Van der Walt, 2024, p. 55). Most importantly, they have affirmed the embodied dignity and agency of LGBTIQ+ people, enabling the movement from annunciation to denunciation to transformation, from “broken bodies” to “community building, care, and accompaniment” (Van der Walt, 2024, p. 60).

Case Study 4: Challenging the Academy—Workers’ Rights

Our final example engages with the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the institution within which the Ujamaa Centre is based. Since its establishment in 1989, what is now the Ujamaa Centre has recognized the University as a site of struggle (West, 2022a). Among the reasons for this social location was the potential for creating invigorated space within the invited space of a state tertiary education institution. Over more than thirty-five years the Ujamaa Centre has challenged both the University in general and the theology programme in particular to be more overtly contextually connected to the poor and marginalised.

A significant Ujamaa Centre project, which overtly confronted the unjust economic policies of the University, worked alongside those who cleaned our offices, corridors, and toilets. These cleaning staff were outsourced, employed by the Supercare company through labour-brokers. This strategy enabled the University to proclaim that it paid all its staff just and decent wages (International Labour Organization, 1999), when in fact a significant number of staff were outsourced and paid unjust wages. In much the same way as the Ujamaa Centre facilitated the formation of the Siyaphila group of people living with HIV, so too the Ujamaa Centre welcomed the Supercare workers into our University offices in 2008, offering them use of our facilities for their tea-breaks and lunch-

breaks. Accompanying the Supercare workers in this way led to collaborative CBS work together through 2008-2009, first using Genesis 1 and 2 to reflect on biblical understandings of work and God as a worker, then Matthew 20:1-16 to analyse the mechanisms of economic exploitation, then Luke 5:1-10 to recognize Jesus as a worker, and finally Acts 4:32-35 to affirm solidarity among workers (Ujamaa Centre, 2008, 2009; West & Zwane, 2013). Slowly, amidst the intimidatory practices of the Supercare company, the University-based Supercare workers organised themselves, formed alliances with other Supercare workers in other parts of the country, and unionised with the Black Allied Workers' Union (BAWU). In March 2016, after years of struggle, the cleaners who had worked for Supercare were in-sourced by the University. [*Posible espacio para incluir una cita directa de un trabajador sobre el impacto del proceso*].

The invigorating spatial presence of the Ujamaa Centre within a programme of theology has had a significant impact on theological studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The biblical studies discipline has been substantially transformed through the work of the Ujamaa Centre (West & Zwane, 2020), and the Ujamaa Centre has made a substantive contribution to changing biblical studies as a discipline both nationally and internationally (Lawrence, Smit, Strømmen, & Van der Walt, 2024; West, 2025). Furthermore, the systematic theology discipline (Cochrane, 1999), as well as the church history discipline (Denis, 2005), have also been substantially changed by their collaboration with the Ujamaa Centre. The Ujamaa Centre has created a “porous” boundary between the academy and community (Preece, 2017, p. 45), enabling the community to have a presence and a space in the academy and facilitating the access of theological students to organised sectors of the community (West, 2004).

Each of these examples (see also Zwane, 2025) demonstrates the capacity of CBS to facilitate forms of community-based (and academy-based) transformation.

Conclusion

Contextual Bible Study is a particular form of African biblical scholarship, where community-based readers, hearers, and users of the Bible collaborate with socially engaged biblical scholars in a participatory re-reading of the Bible for the purpose of participatory community-based development. CBS enables invited space to become community-based invigorated space, with the potential to create community-based invented space, within which participatory community-based development projects might flourish. CBS enables marginalised community-based voices, in solidarity with marginalised biblical voices, to move from community-based annunciation to community-based denunciation to community-based transformation. Through the access CBS provides to ancient biblical marginalised voices, contemporary participants identify the

resonances between their own embodied voices and these ancient sacred voices, confirming among themselves their local contextual corporate voice (Scott, 1990), and going on to affirm their voice as agents of social transformation.

Intersecting systems of oppression constrain community-based development, offering only invited, controlled space. CBS disrupts these systems by recognising their presence in both ancient biblical contexts and contemporary contexts, thereby facilitating a community's capacity to inhabit this invited space with integrity and resilience, generating forms of invigorated space within which they might forge their own resisting invented spaces where they become the agents of their own community-based development projects.

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