Building bridges towards a more humane society : explorations in contextual biblical interpretation on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Bridging Gaps exchange program

BUILDING BRIDGES
TOWARDS A MORE HUMANE SOCIETY

Explorations in Contextual Biblical Interpretation
on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary
of the Bridging Gaps Exchange Program

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Globethics.net Co-Publications & Others
Kirsten van der Ham, Geke van Vliet, Peter-Ben Smit and Klaas Spronk (Eds.),
Building Bridges Towards a More Humane Society
Explorations in Contextual Biblical Interpretation on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Bridging Gaps Exchange Program
Geneva: Globethics.net, 2022
DOI: 10.58863/20.500.12424/4220575
ISBN 978-2-88931-486-7 (online version)
ISBN 978-2-88931-487-4 (print version)

Managing Editor: Dr Ignace Haaz
Assistant Editor: Jakob Bühlmann Quero

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1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
Website: *www.globethics.net/publications*
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All web links in this text have been verified as of September 2022

The electronic version of this book can be downloaded for free from the Globethics.net website: www.globethics.net.

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TRAVELLING TOWARDS THE FUTURE OF THEOLOGY

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1. Introduction

The Bridging Gaps programme has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on the lives and careers of its participants and on the lives of the institutions and their staff members that have committed themselves to partner with the programme. In this introduction, a brief historical retrospect of the Bridging Gaps programme will be followed by a more extensive outline of its significance as a laboratory for theological innovation and the development of forms of 'science for society,' both in the Netherlands and globally. This will be followed by an overview of the contents of this volume, which originated in the symposium, *Building Bridges towards a More Humane Society*, organised to celebrate 25 years of Bridging Gaps on October 16 and 17, 2020.

2. History of the Bridging Gaps Programme

The beginnings of the Bridging Gaps programme can be found in the tradition of liberation and intercultural (contextual) theology that has been part of the Faculty of Theology (Faculty of Religion and Theology now) at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) since the 1970s. Indicative of the commitment of this tradition was the awarding of a doctorate *honoris causa* to the leading Brazilian liberation theologian, Dom Hélder Câmara, who served as Archbishop of Olinda and Recife in 1975. Some years later, a chair bearing the name of Hélder Câmara was established. It was filled as a temporary chair for some years, but it became a permanent professorship by special appointment in 2007. Em. Prof. Dr. Hans de Wit, who was already serving as an associate professor of contextual theology at VU's theological faculty, became the first chairholder. De Wit had also been responsible for establishing the Bridging Gaps programme in 1994, ensuring the cooperation of not only his faculty but also of the VU Vereniging (a foundation closely connected to the VU) and Kerk in Actie (the missionary organisation of what had, in 2004, become the Protestant Church in the Netherlands) as the programme's financial backers. Cooperation was also established with several societal partners in Amsterdam and ecclesial partners throughout the country, ensuring the programme participants plentiful opportunities for exposure.

Beginning with a modest number of students from Latin America and then gradually expanding to a group of approximately 15 students from all over the world, the programme has been dedicated from its outset to exploring contextual forms of theology. This concerned, especially, engaging in contextual biblical interpretation, in the tradition of liberation theology, with a community of learners characterised by *convivencia* – i.e., living and studying together – and pursuing theology as a means of achieving 'buen vivir' or 'good living' for all of human society and creation at large. Gaps between cultures, between ecclesial

traditions, between (academic) theology and society, and between possibilities for academic learning were crossed. The interpersonal encounters in this community of learners functioned as catalysts for theological reflection and the fostering of relationships in and through the programme. Although he was the driving force behind the programme, Hans de Wit has worked with many assistants appointed for the programme, with the legendary clergy in Amsterdam, such as padre Theo (Beusink O. Carm, founder of the Casa Migrante), as well as with the faculty and staff members of Kerk in Actie, especially on research projects concerning contextual biblical interpretations initiated in the context of the Dom Hélder Câmara Chair. Following his retirement in 2015, De Wit was succeeded in his professorship by Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit. The Centre for Contextual Biblical Interpretation was also founded at this time, a joint venture of the Protestant Theological University (PThU) and the Faculty of Religion and Theology of the VU, with Prof. Dr. Klaas Spronk of the PThU as co-director of the centre, together with Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit. Since this shift, the Bridging Gaps programme has also been coordinated through the centre, with the most recent staff members being Rev. Willemien van Berkum – Villamil Morea as coordinator and Gijsbert Steenbeek as student assistant, superseded by Kirsten van der Ham as coordinator and Geke van Vliet as student assistant.

Today, the Bridging Gaps programme has grown into much more than what it was originally. Not only has the group of participating students grown (with a cap of about 15 participants to ensure group coherence and interaction) and more societal partners become involved in it, but also an international network of more than 100 academic and social partners has come into being, who have all given students the opportunity to participate in the programme. The alumni/-ae themselves, some 250 now, constitute a community of theologians that spans the

globe and seeks to work for the good of the common home of all, the earth and its inhabitants.

3. Value for Theological Education and Research in Society and Church

According to research on the programme, the programme has broadened the horizons of its former participants.[1] There is a significant danger in measuring the value of programmes (and people), as it can mean, for example, reducing something or someone to their (immediate) usefulness for solving problems or to their economic value. Nonetheless, it makes sense to consider the ways in which the programme has contributed to a more humane society – one of its ideals.

To begin with, when considering the feedback of participants over the course of the past 25 years, it is obvious that the bridging of gaps between cultures, between possibilities for academic study, between confessional traditions and between academia, society, and church, has enabled them to grow as individuals, as (community) leaders and, often, as scholars. The symposium out of which this volume emerged has several examples of this, featuring alumni/-ae who have gone on to become church leaders, such as Darío Barolín and Manuel Ernesto, and academic leaders, such as Funlola Olojede and Mary-Luz Reyes Bejarano. Nico Koopman has even become the dean of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. They, and others, have also maintained a strong intercultural and ecumenical outlook, while pursuing a kind of theology, either in practice or in

[1] Kirsten van der Ham and Catharina Margaretha (Geke) van Vliet, "Experiencing Ecumenism in an International Theological Exchange Programme: Bridging the Gap between Grassroots Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Movement," *International Review of Mission* 109, no. 2 (2020): 340–354.

academia, geared towards the humanisation of society. Many other examples could, of course, be added.

Another group that has benefitted from the programme are the academic institutions involved. Those institutions who sent their students to participate in the Bridging Gaps programme could benefit from the new knowledge and experiences of the students, partly because many alumni/-ae are now serving as staff members of faculties of theology or seminaries, such as Thane Htut Phan at the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Yangon, or Yoimel González Hernández, who serves as the dean of the Latino Deacons School in Washington, DC. Yet, the receiving institutions – VU (for the entire duration of the programme) and the PThU (since the establishment of the Centre for Contextual Biblical Interpretation in 2016) – together with the various seminaries affiliated with them – notably, het Doopsgezind Seminarium (the Mennonite Seminary), het Remonstrants Seminarium (the Remonstrant Seminary), and het Baptistenseminarium (the Baptist Seminary), as well as the International Baptist Study Centre – have substantially gained from the programme. This pertains, for example, to the increased diversity of the classes and seminars in which the Bridging Gaps participants took part, thereby creating a horizon-broadening intercultural and ecumenical exchange, one that is formative and enriching for the otherwise both denominationally and culturally much less diverse student body of the organising institutions. That the kind of theology pursued by the Bridging Gaps group can inspire the Dutch and international students at the VU and PThU, that it may well have a lasting impact on them and, through them, on the future of theology in the Netherlands and abroad might be suggested by the research projects focused on a number of them: Kirsten van der Ham on churches and racism in the Netherlands and contextual biblical interpretation (PhD project at PThU), Geke van Vliet on the role of churches, especially youths, in climate justice and sustainable development (MA at the

Mennonite Seminary at VU and PhD project at University of Pretoria), Eva van Urk on human–creation relationships in the Anthropocene (PhD project at VU), Pieter Dirk Dekker on the notion of the election of the poor in relation to 'prosperity Gospel' (PhD project at VU), and Iris Veerbeek on children's theology and ecology in Dutch citizenship education (PhD project at VU). The PhD projects were funded through NWO (2), the PThU (1), and the junior fellowship 'Ethics in the Anthropocene' (VU; 1).

Similarly, the horizons of the programme's staff members have been broadened, sometimes simply by cooperating with a student from a completely different context, which sometimes led to new and surprising considerations in one's own field. A New Testament professor, even one specialising in gender studies, can still learn quite a bit from a student researching the 'visitation,' i.e., the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45), when she brings to this text her experience of having worked with pregnant and disadvantaged women as a physiotherapist.[2] In addition, the interaction with a Colombian Bridging Gaps student gave Old Testament Prof. Dr. Klaas Spronk new insights into the text of Ecclesiastes 9.[3] Again, many other examples could be added here; in fact, in this context, it is worth pointing out that multiple PhD projects at VU and PThU have originated from students' participation in the Bridging Gaps' programme, such as that of Lady Paula R. Mandalika[4], which is also present in this volume, and of Andrés Felipe Pacheco Lozano, which he defended just before the

[2] Peter-Ben Smit, "*Sororidad* als bron van inspiratie: De visitatio in nieuw licht," *Goed Leven is Radicaal Verzet*, NZR cahier 6 (2022 forthcoming).

[3] Klaas Spronk, "Dealing with Death: Reading Qoheleth in Different Contexts," in *The Five Scrolls*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan, Archie Chi Chung Lee, and Gale A. Yee (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 145–156.

[4] Lady P. R. Mandalika, "Tableau Vivant from Indonesia," in *Through the Eyes of the Other-Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. H. de Wit, L. Jonker, M. Kool, and D. Schipani (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004).

symposium was held.[5] Apparently, the programme is even able to bear fruit through the cooperation between alumni/-ae and staff members in Amsterdam well beyond graduating from it.

In many ways, Dutch churches also benefit from the programme, just as the churches from whom the participants profit from it, given that their students have been shaped by the various 'gaps' that they bridged in Amsterdam. That both of these churches benefit matches their investment in the programme, as it were, by encouraging students to participate and by facilitating the programme and receiving students in congregations throughout the Netherlands. Certainly, there is much to be grateful for the Dutch congregations that received Bridging Gaps participants – some of them started doing it 25 years ago! The 'bubble' of Dutch (mainstream Protestant) Christianity has been burst in a manner that enables congregants to become aware of the fellowship they have with Christians all over the globe, often living in radically different circumstances (and dealing with significantly different topics and themes in their theology and ecclesial life).

Doubtlessly, other groups, persons, and institutions – such as the institutions who achieve their mission by funding the programme, who benefit from the Bridging Gaps – could be added to this survey. Yet, this overview should illustrate that the impact of the programme has been significant, that it exists for a number of reasons and at a number of levels. The reasons for the impact of the programme include its intercultural and ecumenical dimensions. Intercontextuality, which emerges from bringing together people from diverse contexts, is a catalyst for innovation, as long as it is geared towards the common pursuit of what may be called 'buen vivir,' especially when the shape of this pursuit is a shared life, 'convivencia,' all of which describes exactly

[5] Andrés F. Pacheco Lozano, "Towards a Theology of Reconciliation: A Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace to Heal Broken Relations in Colombia" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2020).

the shape and dynamics of the programme. Such innovation, the broadening of horizons, the discovery of new perspectives, and so on, has impacted everyone involved: participants from abroad and from the Netherlands, academic institutions at home and abroad (however one may understand the two terms), as well as churches in the same settings. Added to this is also the experience of empowerment, as the programme underlines the importance of perspectives that have often been (and continue to be) marginalised, even if innovation and renewal often begin at the margins. In sum, the programme can well be described as a laboratory for the future of theology and church, pursuing the former as a form of 'science for society' and the latter as an agent in the humanisation of society.

4. Contents of this Volume

This volume, except for two omissions and three additions, generally follows the original outline of the symposium *Building Bridges towards a More Humane Society*. Unfortunately, due to personal circumstances, Mary-Luz Reyes Bejarano and Ester Damaris Wolla Wunga were unable to rewrite their important contributions into a chapter for this volume. Reyes Bejarano's insights on Bible-reading with groups of women who suffer from gender-based violence in Colombia and Wolla Wunga's view on how churches should respond to migration, informed by her own expertise on human trafficking in Indonesia, are thus absent from this volume, but we can still learn from them by consulting their work.[6]

[6] See Reyes Bejarano's Master thesis at Seminario Evangélico de Teología in Matanzas, Cuba: "Hacia una restauración plena de las mujeres víctimas del conflicto armado en Colombia por medio del acompañamiento pastoral." She also runs the program "healing wounds, restoring lives" with women's groups in Colombia.
See Wolla Wunga's contribution to the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (2019): https://www.cca.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CCA-Newsletter-

This volume is divided into two: 'Contextual theology and contextual biblical interpretation as catalysts for academic theology' and 'A catalyst for community: contextual theology and churches.' The first part, representing the first day of the symposium, will start with an introduction by Ruard Ganzevoort, dean of the Faculty of Religion and Theology at VU Amsterdam, who reflects on the calling of theology: where do our passions and expertise meet the needs of the world? In their contributions, Charlene van der Walt and Tainah Bielah reflect on one of those needs of the world: the marginalisation of the LGBTQI+ community. Van der Walt does so from an Old Testament perspective, inspired by an alt/cult pop song, and Bielah shows how LGBTQI+ churches in Brazil organise themselves in a heteronormative society.

Darío Barolín challenges Old Testament studies to 'scratch where it itches' and proposes a multidisciplinary approach combining economics with the field of theology in general and biblical studies in particular – in an attempt to make theology more relevant for the impoverished. Charl Fredericks carries this idea further, arguing that, in developing such an approach, one should listen to and talk with impoverished people rather than develop (faith-based) strategies to help them as academics.

Funlola Oluseyi Olojede argues in her contribution on reading bible texts with congregations about gender-based violence – originally a response to Reyes Bejerano's lecture – that healing can take place through contextual bible studies, because this method seeks to come close to the human reality. The discussion on the role of women in biblical texts and present-day theologies and the Bridging Gaps tradition is carried further by three authors who participated in the Bridging Gaps programme in 2021, the year after the symposium took place. In her contribution, Melissa Rosales calls attention to the 'unusual presence' of

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24NOV2019-min.pdf; https://united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/sharing-our-stories-claiming-our-names.

women in the genealogy of Jesus. Charel du Toit writes about how we can unhide women in biblical stories in which they are not explicitly named, and Moses Iliya Ogidis writes about the position of women in his local church in Nigeria based on a New Testament interpretation.

Hans de Wit closes the first part of the volume with a column in which he reflects on what 25 years of the Bridging Gaps programme have contributed to theology.

The second part of this volume is dedicated to the contribution of contextual theology to churches. Mechteld Jansen, rector of the PThU at the time of the symposium, reflects on how 25 years of Bridging Gaps have impacted not only the participants but also the university staff and students in Amsterdam. Then, Anglican bishop Manuel Ernesto shares his view on how the church should respond to a forced migration crisis, informed by his own reality of the refugee crisis of mostly Congolese refugees in Nampula, Mozambique. Thereafter, Lady Mandalika shares her experiences with contextual Bible-reading of Hosea with communities threatened with an environmental crisis: the pollution of Lake Poso by big companies. Reacting to this contribution, Geke van Vliet calls for more attention to the position of women in climate change. Corrie van der Ven, the programme leader of Kerk in Actie, closes the second part of the volume by reflecting on how encounters with international students have impacted churches in the Netherlands, noting that these encounters challenge prejudices about churches in other parts of the world and make Dutch churches aware that they are part of a worldwide Church that has many faces.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Bridging Gaps programme, of which the present volume is expressive in a derivative manner, is, both for those involved in it and for many observing it, a place for theological innovation, empowerment, and the development of insights that benefit society,

churches, and academia in equal measure. It is also a place that prepares its participants for the next stages of their journeys as theologians working for the common good. As editors, we hope that the current volume can communicate some of the inspiration that the programme's participants have received and given in the course of the past 25 years. Many persons, as they have been named above, and institutions, including the academic partners mentioned in this introduction, have made the programme possible. Without these institutions wishing to put their financial resources at the disposal of the programme and its vision, none of this would have been possible. We gratefully record the contribution of Kerk in Actie, VUvereniging – the two institutions also facilitated the symposium and the edition of this volume –Stichting Sormani Fonds, Gereformeerde Zendingsbond, Nederlands Luthers Genootschap, Stichting Catherina Halkes Fonds, Doopsgezind Seminarium, Remonstrants Seminarium, and Baptistenseminarium to the Bridging Gaps programme, and, in addition, CLUE+ for the edition of this volume. These partners have also seen part of their future in what the Bridging Gaps programme has pursued for the past twenty-five years and hopes to pursue for many years to come, as the need for the humanisation of society has anything but decreased. Theology and church are thus still called upon to contribute to a world that can be a common home for all.

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PART I

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY AND CONTEXTUAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AS CATALYSTS FOR ACADEMIC THEOLOGY

2

DISCERNING THE CALLING OF THEOLOGY

Ruard R. Ganzevoort

1. Introduction

When we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Bridging Gaps programme, we look back in gratitude for the enrichment it has offered to not only its participants but also the theological institutions that hosted the programme. Having students from a wide diversity of backgrounds brought voices from many parts of the world—including Asia, Africa, Latin and South America, and Eastern Europe. Voices that challenged the host institutions and raised questions and perspectives different from those commonly heard in the highly secularised and relatively affluent context of the Netherlands.

Moments of celebration and commemoration are also opportunities for contemplation. What is the calling of theology – and theologians – in the concrete situation we live in? In other words, do we understand the 'kairos' of our times? How do we read the 'signs of the times'? How does that understanding affect what we have done in the past, and how does it affect what we do today? To whom are we accountable for what

we have done or will do? Who benefits from our theology, and who suffers from it?

When we discuss these questions, we engage in public theology, no matter which theological discipline one is specialised in. It may be helpful to distinguish between three kinds of public theology: 1) missionary theology, which aims to spread the Christian message around the globe and thus make the church grow; 2) critical or liberation theology, which aims to change the world by critically analysing it and confronting it with biblical values; and 3) cultural hermeneutics, which uses theological concepts to understand the deep meanings of cultures and societies.[7] Although all three kinds of public theology are legitimate and meaningful, to explore the questions raised in this contribution, I primarily choose the critical kind of public theology.

Attributed (probably mistakenly, and popularised by many) to Aristotle, it is said that our vocation is found at the intersection of our passions, our capacities, and the needs of the world. Regardless of its source, the saying serves as a powerful tool for reflecting on what theology could and should mean to today's world and to the faith communities living in it. When our passions are disconnected from expertise, it leads to amateurism. When our expertise is disconnected from our passions, it leads to disengagement. And when we are disconnected from the needs of the world, both our passions and expertise become blatantly irrelevant. The questions to be answered, then, to reflect on our calling are the following: what are our passions, and what drives us in our work? What are the capacities, skills, and expertise that theology brings to the table? And what do we identify as the fundamental needs of the world?

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[7] Cf Ruard R. Ganzevoort, "Forks in the Road when Tracing the Sacred. Practical Theology as Hermeneutics of Lived Religion," paper presented at the International Academy of Practical Theology, Chicago (2009).

2. The Needs of the World

I start with the last question because it avoids the risk of inside-out thinking, which takes our own perspective as the standard and tries to find a need that suits our interests. Outside-in thinking, in contrast, leads to new approaches and innovation, as we have seen in the critical reflections emerging from liberation theologians, feminist theologians, contextual Bible-reading projects, and pop-culture theology.[8] Starting with the needs of the world, three interlocking issues come to the fore: the global COVID-19 pandemic, structural inequality and racism, and the climate crisis. At first glance, these issues seem rather unrelated. COVID-19 can be described and is often approached as a grave medical challenge, one demanding the implementation of strict measures based purely on medical – especially epidemiological – insights. Structural inequality and racism are usually approached as socio-economic and legal challenges, albeit fraught with emotional overtones that often lead to polarisation rather than resolution. The climate crisis, denied by a significant number of individuals, organisations, and even some countries, is often considered a matter of technological challenges and/or necessary changes in human behaviour.

Although many may agree that all three issues touch upon existential questions, societal and political responses are usually pragmatic, carrying a short-sighted bias towards the local rather than the global, the short term rather than the long term. An obvious corollary to this pragmatic short-sightedness is the (probably subconscious) assumption that all three, instead of being human induced and sustained, are basically quasi-natural phenomena. In effect, they are considered mostly unrelated to fundamental spiritual, religious, or philosophical questions.

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[8] Cf Ruard R. Ganzevoort, "Framing the Gods. The Public Significance of Religion from a Cultural Point of View," in *The Public Significance of Religion*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Hans-Georg Ziebertz (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 95–120.

One question theologians may start to ask, therefore, is what the intersection between these three issues might be, and how that intersection relates to the spiritual or religious domains. The question is not far-fetched. COVID-19 has exacerbated structural inequalities between individuals, groups, and societies. People with low-income jobs are more exposed to risks of infection, have fewer opportunities to protect themselves, and suffer more from lockdowns and quarantines because of their housing situation. Meanwhile, rich countries have the upper hand in acquiring and distributing vaccines, thereby increasing global inequality (and, actually, the risk of developing new and potentially more dangerous variants).

Similarly, the climate crisis significantly increases inequalities, with the more affected communities usually finding themselves in situations with fewer resources for adaptation. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, because they augment inequalities, lead to an increased polarisation, an increasing demand for solidarity, and an increasing push towards migration and international dependencies. In short, they foster geopolitical imbalances, imbalances that are fertile grounds for social ostracisation and racism.

At this point, I am reminded of the 'conciliar process' that the World Council of Churches initiated in 1983, a ten-year programme of 'mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.'[9] The prophetic vision behind this process has not lost its pertinence, especially because it takes a holistic perspective in identifying the major problems of the contemporary world. Although this fundamentally spiritual approach to fundamental societal challenges has not always resonated well in (international) politics, the concepts used are more than applicable now, some 40 years later, when we understand that peace and justice are also at stake in the three issues I foregrounded here, that the integrity of creation proves to be even more fundamental

[9] *Now is the Time.* JPIC Final Document, Geneva, 1990.

to those issues than it may have been acknowledged in the 1980s. To take these interlocking challenges seriously, we need to address the domains of climate justice, medical justice, and, especially, the fundamental interconnectedness of all creation of which we are part.

3. Our Expertise

What, then, can theology offer to the needs of the world? Obviously, the expertise of theologians varies from detailed scrutiny of biblical sources to understanding the history and development of traditions of faith to analysing the logic and coherence of religious convictions to critically describing and fostering faith practices within and beyond faith communities. All these can be brought to the table when dealing with the fundamental needs of the world, especially when we consider the intersections between them. The current challenges may not be identical to those encountered by our predecessors in biblical times, but the traditions of wisdom represented by various religions remain an invaluable resource for critical reflection and inspiration. These traditions of wisdom help us cope with the radical uncertainty of our human condition in times of climate crisis, our existential frailty surfacing during a global pandemic, our fundamental connectedness with the world and its inhabitants, and our ubiquitous struggle to uphold peace and justice for all. For me, the present crises and biblical insights result in at least the following four challenges that theology should take seriously.

First, we need to consider that, over the course of centuries, but especially in this age called the Anthropocene, humankind has not espoused the virtues of stewardship but has instead chosen destructive dominion over nature. In light of the fact that human extinction is a real possibility, one that would probably be beneficial to the earth and its other creatures, critical theological self-reflection is needed about the often-claimed unique position humans have among the rest of creation. How can we overcome our broadly shared hubris, possibly grounded in a dangerous interpretation of the Imago Dei, and develop a sense of cosmic humility?[10]

Second, we need to consider that, although our efforts to diminish our vulnerability to the vicissitudes of life, including pandemic diseases, may have been successful in some ways, our technological advances have, in fact, produced a 'risk society,'[11] one where we are prone to human-induced disasters on a global scale. Not only does this change our perspective on contingency and human agency, but it also leads to the question of how risks are distributed across different communities and individuals. Even when addressing natural disasters, the issue of 'risk justice' becomes important.[12] Human frailty is no longer an amoral reality, if that was ever the case, but it has taken on a strong moral significance.

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[10] Ruard R. Ganzevoort, "Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: A Theological Essay about new Technologies," in *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, ed. Jan-Albert Van den Berg (Bloemfontein, South Africa: SUN Press, 2020), 45–64.

[11] Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1986).

[12] Alan March, Leonardo Nogueira de Moraes, and Janet Robin Stanley, "Dimensions of Risk Justice and Resilience: Mapping Urban Planning's Role Between Individual Versus Collective Rights," in *Natural Hazards and Disaster Justice: Challenges for Australia and Its Neighbours*, eds. Anna Lukasiewicz and Claudia Baldwin (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 93–115.

Third, we need to consider that hegemonic western theologies have often contributed to segregating individuals and communities rather than to a holistic understanding of our interconnectedness. Sometimes, this segregation was based on nationalism, racism, or similar exclusionary perspectives that many theologians today will find untenable.[13] Sometimes, this segregation is still defended based on religious differences or opinions about gender and sexuality. Whatever ground is used to support division and segregation, the question of whether our theology contributes to an understanding of the world as being holistically interconnected must be raised.

Fourth, we need to consider the degree to which the (Protestant?) tendency to foreground dogmatic truth, the (Catholic?) tendency to highlight aesthetic liturgical values, and the widespread tendency to locate ethical values especially in the individual domain of physical behaviours, such as sexuality, substance use, and violence influence our theologies. This could challenge us to ask whether we have given enough attention to matters of structural, political, and economic injustices and violence. Notwithstanding many theological contributions that have addressed this domain of public justice, in many contexts, faith communities may still face the temptation to look the other way.

4. Our Passion and Calling

Finally, I need to discuss our passions. A keyword in this challenge within theology for me is compassion.[14] Compassion is not just an emotional or mental state of empathy; it is not altruistic behaviour with which it is commonly associated. In my view, compassion is first and

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[13] Marthe Hesselmans, *Racial Integration in the Church of Apartheid: A Unity Only God Wants* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018).

[14] Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2010).

foremost the awareness that we are connected to the entirety of creation, that what happens to any part of creation affects all of it (cf 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). This awareness includes not only humans but also (other) animals and the inanimate world surrounding us, as Saint Francis already understood. Based on this awareness is our willingness to be affected by the sufferings and joys of others and to be engaged in contributing to the well-being of all. This makes compassion an integrative and wholesome spiritual exercise that could be considered the central passion for theology and, therefore, a cornerstone for understanding our calling.

Our calling as theologians in the twenty-first century now becomes more concrete: it is to understand the signs of our times and address the fundamental challenges humankind and the earth are facing. It is to self-critically assess the positive and negative contributions that our theological endeavours have yielded. It is to creatively and constructively build an inclusive, humble, and life-giving theology. It is precisely this calling that is prominent in the Bridging Gaps programme and that is exemplified in the many contributions of its alumni.

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3

I WON'T BEHAVE MYSELF
I WON'T HATE MYSELF

HARNESSING THE MULTI-COLOURED BUTTERFLY IN GENESIS 37 AS AN *IZITABANE* ICON.

Charlene van der Walt

1. I Know What You Want from Me

Desire, intimacy, and connection expressed by bodies outside the hetero-patriarchal script often experience corrective gender policing[15] and forms of surveillance and control, ranging from name-calling, disapproving looks, and death stares to violent annihilation[16]. These responses stem from the constructed stability of systemically informed notions of what is considered 'normal.' All the positionalities or lived realities that fall outside this collectively agreed and socially constructed

[15] Charlene van der Walt, Head of Gender and Religion at the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Deputy Director of the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research.

[16] Shannon Devy and Evan Strauss, "I know What You Want from Me." Track 6 on LoGhost's album *Cult Pop.* Cape Town: KuduKudu, 2019.

norm are considered perverse and counter to the norm. Perversion, or being understood to be perverse or acting perverse, thus holds close connection to what is systemically understood and reinforced as normative. Biological sex, as a hetero-patriarchal paradigm insists, should align with gender identity expression and inform the resulting compulsory heterosexuality.

Guarding the norm or keeping it intact is not an innocent or neutral endeavour. Foucauldian theory has enabled praxis reflection that slows down the process of interrogating and critically engaging with the mechanics of power when it comes to understanding how normative ideas or constructions come into being, what sustains them, and how they change over time. Foucault's entire oeuvre, it could be argued, is foundationally concerned with understanding how normative ideas regarding education, care, order, and, ultimately, sex come into being, how these ideas are systemically maintained, and how they change. Foucault's understanding of this change is not underpinned by notions of time; instead, he describes change as the result of a complex web of power dynamics that systemically maintains the normative.[17]

Feminist, gender, post-colonial and decoloniality, and critical race scholars have done much to appropriate Foucault's ideas into the landscape of identity politics, especially by considering the embodied lived reality of those situated outside the norm.[18] When being a man, or being white, or being of high socio-economic standing, or being 'Western,' or being heterosexual is considered the norm, the process of

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[17] For more on this, see: Michel Foucault, "Power and Strategies," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Sussex: The Harvest Press, 1980), 134–145.

[18] Although not an exhaustive list, Foucault's work on power has been appropriated by post-colonial scholars such as Edward Said (1978, 1993) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987, 1999) and feminist and critical gender scholars including Wendy Brown (1995, 2006), Judith Butler (1997, 2004), Kimberly Crenshaw et al. (1996), and Jana Sawicki (2020).

othering, stigmatisation, perversion, policing, and violence implemented to protect or keep in place the normative is not innocent, neutral, or matter of fact.[19]

In short, to protect the norm, those who are considered outside the norm are constructed as 'the other.' Numerous biblical and contemporary examples illustrate how the other is stripped of humanity and made out to be sub-human and thus worthy of contempt, violence, and annihilation.[20] As identified by theorists like Foucault and others, one of the key mechanisms that protects and maintains the normative is the normative gaze of surveillance,[21] a mechanism through which individuals are systemically kept in check, especially when it comes to embodiment, sex, and pleasure.

The South Africa Music Award (SAMA)-winning, Cape-Town-based alt/cult-pop duo LoGhost, consisting of Shannon Devy and Evan Strauss, bring these theoretical reflections to the realm of popular culture and sexuality. LoGost started publishing its music in 2016 and has consistently grappled with themes that speak to contemporary queer experiences in a Southern African context. The song *I know what you want from me*, the song that includes the lyrics that title this

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[19] Although I am grouping race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality together in this statement, I don't imply that these struggles are similar or the same. Instead, I aim to highlight the systemic affinities underlying the stability of the normative and the strategies employed to keep the normative intact. Race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality struggles for liberation are unique and hold unique yet intersectional experiences and dynamics.

[20] One could think of the description of the Israelites in Egypt after the memory of Joseph fades in Exodus 1 or the stigmatised Samaritans of the New Testament. For critical reflections in this regard, see: Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Christian Neuhaeuser, and Elaine Webster, eds. *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated Vol. 24*, (Springer Science & Business Media, 2010).

[21] Gilbert Caluya, "The Post-panoptic Society? Reassessing Foucault in Surveillance Studies," *Social Identities* 16, no. 5 (2010): 621–633.

contribution, expresses the songwriters' understanding of what is expected from them so that they fit the norm, articulating the effect of pervasive heteronormative expectations, especially in the *I know what you want from me* refrain. The song is part of their album *Cult Pop*, launched in November 2019, in which they poignantly articulate something of the normative gaze informed by the systemic ideology of hetero-patriarchy:

> Fall to my death in this conversation
> I'm never coming round again
> Because I know what you want from me
> I know what you want from me
>
> Get a real job
> Get a god
> Get a nice boy to marry you
> Oh yeah, I know what you want from me[22]

Devy drew inspiration from her own life for the song:

> Essentially, 'I Know What You Want From Me' is a deeply personal confrontation with what it means to live a life that is systematically rejected as abnormal. It's about questioning safety, mental health, a lack of connection and self-hatred that have formed a part of my experience.[23]

Devy's reflection adds further nuance to the normal versus abnormal dichotomy when it comes to the navigation of sexual diversity and

[22] Follow this link to listen to the song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5sWTiHxkck.

[23] Shannon Lawlor, "An Important Conversation with Cape Town-based duo Lo-ghost," *Red Bull*, May 25, 2020, https://www.redbull.com/za-en/an-important-conversation-with-lo-ghost.

gender identity. As Devy notes, the normalising strategies described at the outset of this contribution have very real consequences for the safety, mental health, and self-actualisation process of those navigating non-heteronormative expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity. Culture and religion, which are deeply informed by sacred scripture engagement, are predominantly appropriated to bolster the seeming stability and normalcy of fixed binary gender and heteronormative constructions. The intersection of static notions of African culture and exclusivist religious positionalities, deeply informed by uncritical biblical appropriations, foundationally informs the exclusion of *Izitabane* in the African context. *Izitabane* is a derogatory term employed to describe and discriminate against African LGBTQIA+ people.

The lyrics further chillingly articulate the consequences of the normative gaze of surveillance that aims to keep the norm intact by undermining, discrediting, undoing, violently annihilating, or correcting everything that is considered counter-normative or perverse. The reality of homophobic hate crimes is accentuated in these lyrics:

> Watch my friends getting married don't worry I'll MC your wedding
> And then I'll sit down again
> We can all pretend that these men aren't trying to kill us
> They're trying to kill us

South Africa is considered the birthplace of a very specific form of homophobic hate crime, the so-called 'corrective rape.' Although the term is highly contested, it aims to bring to words an act of violence against women committed by men ostensibly to 'cure' lesbians of their non-conforming sexual orientation or to 'correct' them from it,

'disciplining' them to be 'proper' heterosexual women.[24] Although the reality of this homophobic hate crime and the fact that it often takes place in families or intimate community settings has been raised as a major life-threatening concern for many, especially black lesbians, it is often swept under the rug, with many continuing to pretend '*that these men are not trying to kill us*.' The alarming increase in the incidence of homophobic hate crimes in 2021 has led several LGBTQIA+ and civil society organisations to formulate a joint statement. Released on April 21, 2021, the statement demands that, in light of the spate of hate crime murders in South Africa, more should be done to ensure the safety of LGBTQIA+ people.[25]

Beyond the external threat inherent in homophobic hate crimes, Devy further sheds light on the dynamic involved when external policing and surveillance are internalised:

> In that song, I'm telling you – but I'm also convincing myself. Because the most insidious and damaging thing that nobody talks about enough is how easily that hatred and disgust is internalised in Queer bodies – how painful that is, how much work it takes to excavate it and how severely it can poison your system.[26]

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[24] For more in this regard, see Leorenzo Di Silvio, "Correcting Corrective Rape: Carmichele and Developing South Africa's Affirmative Obligations to Prevent Violence Against Women," *Geo. LJ* 99 (2012): 1469; Lea Mwambene and Maudri Wheal, "Realisation or Oversight of a Constitutional Mandate? Corrective Rape of Black African Lesbians in South Africa," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 15, no. 1 (2015): 58–88.

[25] For a full version of the statement, see: https://za.boell.org/ en/2021/04/22/21-april-2021-joint-statement-spate-hate-crime-murders-lgbtiq-people-say-more-needs-be.

[26] Shannon, "An Important Conversation."

Keeping in mind these internal and external contextual realties, I now turn my attention to discussions closer to home. I reflect on the possibility of the troubling way the Bible is appropriated in religious circles to inform the exclusion and violent annihilation of African *Izitabane*.

2. I Won't Behave Myself

Although religion and biblical interpretation is foundational in much of the complexity discussed above and profoundly forms part of the strands of oppression affecting the lives of LGBTQIA+ in the African context, there is also a growing awareness of the liberating potential that responsible and accountable Bible engagement and religious communities of care hold for the poor and marginalised. In the final part of this paper, I offer an example of how the Bible can be appropriated in a productive and affirming way for African LGBTQIA+ people.

As hinted at above, often when engaging with issues of gender and sexuality, the Bible is wielded as an external source document that somehow contains answers or rules and prescriptions informing correct ethical behaviour and contemporary conduct. It is also often prescribed who is supposed to be reading and engaging with the Bible. Consequently, the Bible often remains only in the hands of church leaders or biblical scholars. As an alternative, when engaging with contemporary issues located at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion, I would like to point to the liberating potential of contextual Bible study (CBS). Informed by foundational insights from Latin American liberation theology and the underpinnings of feminist theory, CBS appropriates a deeply contextual See-Judge-Act methodology.

According to this approach, the lived reality of a particular marginalised community or population, as they themselves understand it, is the starting point of the first 'See' moment of the praxis cycle. The approach seriously considers the embodied contextual lived reality of

those often deliberately silenced or preferably un-heard.[27] The 'See' moment calls for intersectional contextual reflections that privilege those most affected by a specific reality and aims to develop thick contextual and embodied analysis and societal understandings.

After an in-depth contextual engagement, the praxis cycle moves on to the 'Judge' moment, where interpretative communities slowly and deliberatively engage with the biblical texts, drawing on insights from biblical scholarship and using both literary-narrative and socio-historical modes of analysis to identify and read marginalised 'voices' in, under, above, and behind the biblical texts. These ancient biblical voices become dialogue partners of contemporary marginalised communities, as the text functions as a dynamic reflective surface.[28] Safe spaces, or, as some might argue, brave spaces, are constructed with care to facilitate dynamic engagement, where the lived reality of interpreters interacts with the contextual reality of biblical texts.[29]

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[27] Arundhati Roy makes the poignant observation that there is indeed no such entity as the voiceless, but rather frames the systemic power dynamics that deliberately silences or prefers not to hear the cries of the poor and marginalised. Roy made this distinction during her acceptance speech when receiving the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004. https://www.smh.com.au/national/roys-full-speech-20041104-gdk1qn.html.

[28] For more on how the Bible functions as a reflective surface in the process of CBS, see Charlene Van der Walt. "'It's the Price I Guess for the Lies I've Told that the Truth it No Longer Thrills Me...': Reading Queer Lies to Reveal Straight Truth in Genesis 38," in *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Bruce. C. Birch (Oregon, USA: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 57–75.

[29] For more on the notion of brave spaces, see Brian Aroa and Kristi Clemens. "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue around Diversity and Social Justice," in *The Art of Effective Facilitation*, ed. L. Landreman. (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2013), 135–150.

Fundamentally, the first two movements of the praxis cycle aim to empower communities to 'Act' collaboratively and with imagination to engage with situations of injustice, marginalisation, and violence.

This approach has been fruitfully and impactfully employed and developed by the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research.[30] Over the last 30 years, it has engaged with numerous thematic areas and vulnerable populations, including survivors of gender-based violence,[31] communities living with HIV and Aids,[32] communities impacted by dehumanising socio-economic realities,[33] and, most recently, the LGBTQIA+ community.[34] The Ujamaa Centre works on an invitational basis, aiming to draw organised community groups to offer ideo-theological resources that will stimulate work towards social

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[30] The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research is hosted within the confines of the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (http://ujamaa. ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx).

[31] Gerald West, Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, Martin Maluleke, Happiness Khumalo, Phidian Smadz Matsepe, and Mirolyn Naidoo, "Rape in the House of David: The Biblical Story of Tamar as a Resource for Transformation," *Agenda* 18, no. 61 (2004): 36–41; Gerald O. West, "Recovering the Biblical Story of Tamar: Training for Transformation, Doing development," in *For Better, For Worse: The Role of Religion in Development Cooperation*, ed. Robert Odén (Halmstad: Swedish Mission Council, 2016), 135–147; Charlene Van der Walt. "'But He Refused to Listen to Her…': Developing a Safe Communal Space where Marginal Voices can be Heard," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 159 (2017): 5-21.

[32] Gerald West and Bongi Zengele, "The Medicine of God's Word: What People Living with HIV and AIDS Want (and Get) from the Bible," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 1, no. 125 (2006): 51–63.

[33] Gerald O. West, "Facilitating Interpretive Resilience: The Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) as a Site of Struggle," *Acta Theologica*, 38 (2018): 17–37.

[34] Gerald O. West, Charlene van der Walt, and Kapja. J. Kaoma, "When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTQIA+ Groups on Homophobia in Africa," *HTS Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016):1–8.

justice and liberation. The Ujamaa Centre encourages a diversity of Bible readers to '*not behave themselves*' but rather to trouble interpretations and interpretative practices that maintain the *status quo* and inform the dehumanisation of the poor and the marginalised.

Besides its principle of working only in spaces where it has been invited to join already established community actions, the Ujaama Centre also aims work with other faith and civil society actors who have already established themselves in the contextual landscape. For instance, the centre's Body Theology work aims to smash the silos often constructed between the academic, faith, and civil society sectors by bringing together actors from these sectors.[35] The contextual realities faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in the African landscape and the urgent need for the development of faith and CBS resources at the intersection of gender, sexual diversity, and faith made the Ujamaa Centre and the Gender and Religion programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) join forces at the beginning of January 2020.[36] Although there has been a productive and fruitful history of collaboration between the organisations, and although the collaboration holds several initiatives, it was the intensive gender and sexual diversity resource development workshop that sharpened the focus of the collaboration. The workshop

[35] The Ujamaa Center has five thematic areas, namely Body Theology, Bread Theology, Earth Theology, People's Theology, and Public Theology. The praxis reflection offered in this contribution aims to contribute to ongoing work in the area of Body Theology.

[36] For more on Inclusive and Affirming Ministries and their theory of change please see: https://iam.org.za/

The *Reading Together* toolkit developed by IAM draws from intercultural and contextual Bible reading insights and combines this with IAM's theory of change, which open hearts (diversity awareness), minds (anti-bias trainings), and doors (inclusive and affirming faith communities), and offer important resources in the landscape of faith institutions and communities.

aimed to develop specific resources that could assist faith communities, clergy, LGBTQIA+ people, and their family and friends to grapple with biblical texts contextually when engaging with issues of gender and sexuality. Genesis 1 and 2, Genesis 18 and 19, Genesis 37, and Acts 8 were selected as the first round of focus texts. These texts not only offer important biblical reflective surfaces when engaging with issues of gender and sexuality but also the resources to spark important contextual conversations for extremely different interpretative communities, ranging from hostile faith communities to allies and LGBTQIA+ people grappling with the Bible.

In the final part of this paper, I will offer some preliminary reflections on an ongoing trajectory of work being developed by engaging with the Joseph narrative from an LGBTQIA+ perspective, appropriating insights from queer biblical scholarship.[37]

3. I Won't Hate Myself

Drawing from the insights of queer biblical hermeneutics, I aim to trouble the stability of often life-denying hermeneutical practices that exclude the LGBTQIA+ community or that are used foundationally to incite hate crimes and violence.[38] I further argue that the playful and disruptive contours offered by a queer engagement with the text could inform *Izitabane* agency.

For this purpose, I turn my qu(e)erying attention to the richly complex Joseph narrative found in Genesis. Joseph is a well-known and eagerly appropriated character in the African context; he is the favourite son of the favourite wife, a dreamer, a slave, and, finally, an imperial

[37] West, "Facilitating Interpretive Resilience," 17–37.

[38] For more on this, please see Teresa J Hornsby and Stone, Ken, "Introduction," in *Bible Trouble. Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship,* ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

overlord.[39] Although the narrative is not beyond religio-cultural and socio-economic complexities, it is precisely the fact that Joseph is so well known and so easily appropriated that makes the narrative an ideal reflective surface to enable the development of a CBS that could function as an interpretative recourse.[40]

In the discussion that follows, I aim to illustrate how insights from critical (queer) biblical scholarship translate into CBS questions, and how these learnings are appropriated to develop and implement reading groups with LGBTQIA+ people.[41]

In the development of the Joseph CBS, the work of queer drama scholar Peterson Toscano has been exceptionally helpful in intersecting the religio-cultural and socio-economic dimensions with gender and sexuality.[42] Toscano picks up on Joseph's non-conforming gender character in one of his performance lectures. The CBS initially drew from this creative work to reflect on Joseph, the indoorsy and dreamy favourite son, as an example of a character who transgresses gender norms in the Bible and who does not adhere to prescribed gender constructions or expectations.

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[39] Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Leiden and Pietermaritzburg: Brill and Cluster Publications, 2016).

[40] A number of scholars pick up on the complexity regarding the character development of Joseph when reading the narrative from a diversity of contextual positionalities. See: Hyun C.P Kim, "Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) as a Diaspora Narrative," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2013): 219–38; Garnet Parris, "The Iconic Joseph: Contesting the African Migrant Churches' View of Joseph," *Black Theology* 99, no. 1 (2011): 77–107; Carole R Fontaine, "'Here Comes This Dreamer': Reading Joseph the Slave in Multi-cultural and Interfaith Contexts," In *Genesis,* ed. Athalya Brenner et al. (Philadelphia, Fortress, 2010), 131–145.

[41] Hanzline Davids and Charlene van der Walt, *Heteropatriarchy Blaming Game: Reading Genesis 37 with Izitabane during COVID19* (Forthcoming).

[42] For more on Toscano's work, see https://petersontoscano.com/.

As is often the case, this CBS starts with a dramatic reading of the text. In this process, a playful engagement with the characters in the Joseph narrative is set up. The characters and intricate dynamics of the story come to life when different participants take part in the story's impromptu dramatisation. This, as it helps readers enter the text in a unique embodied way, has proven to be a productive methodology. The playful dramatisation of the text further destabilises the formal notions of Bible engagement and what are considered the correct or appropriate ways of engaging with it.

In the final part of this paper, I will build on ongoing reflections regarding the development and implementation of the Genesis 37 Bible study. I limit myself to three short examples to illustrate how the queer nature of the text translates into contextual Bible reading questions that, in turn, allow for impactful contextual engagements with the *Izitabane* people and faith communities.

First, I focus on how Joseph is set apart from others in the narrative. The fact that Jacob gifts Joseph a coat of many colours is a questionable parental strategy. That the garment, which has the clear function of an identity marker, is described by the same word used to describe Tamar's dress—fit for a princess, in 2 Samuel 13—opens up an array of queer interpretative possibilities. Jacob gifts Joseph a princess dress, colourfully othering the outsider in the process. However, Joseph is set apart from others not only by his dress but also his dreams. He seems to be unaware of or unperturbed by the emotions evoked in his extended family members by his uncensored way of flaunting his visions before them. Considering the fact that the family atmosphere is rich with negative emotions, one would not have blamed Joseph for toning the dream-talk down a bit or for choosing a more monotone outfit. Instead, we see him strutting his stuff without holding much back. Although he must have known what was wanted from him, he clearly does not

behave himself. We pick up on these dimensions by asking the following sequence of questions:

- Joseph is clearly set apart from the others in this story. What contributes to his otherness?
- Joseph is gifted with a coat of many colours by his father, Jacob. The only other biblical reference, in the original Hebrew, to this type of garment is found in 2 Samuel 13: 18b, where it is described as a coat fit for a princess in the translation.
- How is the coat described in this story, and what is the significance of the garment?
- What feelings does the coat evoke in Joseph's brothers?
- Read verse 5–10 again. Besides being set apart from others because of his dress, Joseph is also described in the story as a dreamer. What effect do Joseph's dreams have on his family?

Joseph's otherness and visible differences strongly resonate with many *Izitabane* interpreters of the text, who often find themselves being othered because of tangible, non-conforming gender expressions. Besides these resonances, the text also evokes conversations about queer agency and the brave possibility of being and becoming everything one dreams to be.

Second, Joseph's otherness, which is amplified by the princess dress, evokes punitive reactions from his brothers. The text highlights the normative gaze when they see him from afar. When he approaches them, they are affronted by his display of otherness, his embodiment of what is outside the expected masculine norm. The transition from seeing this – to hating it, to plotting to do their brother harm, to committing annihilating violence – is slowed down in the reading and re-reading of the text by another sequence of questions. Joseph's brother's physical disciplinary action for his queerness is reminiscent of similar 'corrective/curative' behaviour expressed through the rape of lesbian women in the African context who do not conform to the

heteronormative ideal. We explored the complexity of this dimension of the text by guiding the participants through the following questions:

- Jacob sends Joseph to his brothers in the field, where they are tending the flock. When they see him coming from afar, what emotions are evoked in them, and why?
- Read verses 18–24 together. How do Joseph's brothers respond to his embodied difference?
- Read verses 10–13 again. What do you think informed Jacob's decision to send Joseph to his brothers?
- In light of the discussion above, think about your own lived experiences.
- Have you experienced situations where your otherness made you vulnerable, or where your identity was questioned?

This painful and dramatic moment in the Joseph narrative functions as a reflective surface that enables contextual discussions of punitive violence against queer bodies. Beyond creating space for *Izitabane* readers of the Bible to reflect on their own experiences of violence, the troubling and suggestive questions aim to assist readers in reflecting on Jacob's positionality and responsibility when it comes to the punitive violence committed by his brothers in an attempt to 'correct' Joseph. The complexity of the family dynamic here offers LGBTQIA+ interpreters the opportunity to reflect amongst themselves on their own experiences of vulnerability and violence within their own family contexts. Although research shows that violence of an intimate nature predominantly happens within contexts where perpetrators are known—intimate partners or family members—this is often a reality that remains hidden, denied, or shrouded in shameful silence.[43] The family setting for

[43] For more in this regard, see: Helen Moffett, "'These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them': Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-apartheid South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32 no. 1 (2006): 129–144.

the violence committed against Joseph by those closest to him creates a space for a brave contextual conversation about intimate violence.

As a final theme, I turn my attention to a dimension in the text that has the possibility of sparking hope. A third sequence of questions first aims to enable further reflections on the experiences of violence and exclusion within familiar family contexts, but then turns the discussion into the direction of greater self-acceptance, love, and the possibilities of constructing counter communities of care.

- Read again verse 25–35. How do the people closest to Joseph respond to the events that transpire?
- What has your experience with family been in times of vulnerability? What constitutes family to you?
- From Joseph's experiences of trauma and vulnerability grows a tale of redemption for all sons of Israel (Genesis 42:6 to Genesis 48). What resources for hope does this story offer you?
- How do we actively go about creating communities of care for those who experience vulnerability due to their otherness?

4. Conclusion

The sequence of questions outlined above and the conversations it sparks aim to highlight the ways in which the normative gaze within hetero-patriarchal societies prescribes a transparent notion of what is expected in terms of sexual expression and gender identity. The alignment of biological sex, gender identity expression, and sexual orientation as outlined by hetero-patriarchy leaves little room for embodied expressions outside of the gender binary, cis-gender representation, and heterosexual expressions of love. Considering the pervasive stability of heteronormativity, *Izitabane* can probably sing along with LoGhost when the singer says *I know what you want from me*. What is wanted is clearly informed by religion and culture in the

African context and finds expression in the heteronormative ideal. The contextual and embodied experiences of gender policing and the violent correction of sexual and gender expression make it abundantly clear that one should toe the line and behave. I, however, propose that, by practising CBS, the *Izitabane* of faith have the potential to say that they will no longer continue to behave themselves when it comes to the reading of the Bible; that they will no longer toe the line in terms of who should be reading the Bible and who has the authority in determining the meaning and appropriating biblical texts. In the process of reclaiming the Bible through the practise of CBS, the *Izitabane* of faith, I hope, will move along the liberative arch, expressed by LoGhost as follows: *I know what you want from me, but I won't behave myself and I won't hate myself, I won't hate myself, I won't hate myself.*

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4

LGBTQI+ CHRISTIANS CHALLENGING CONSERVATIVE THEOLOGICAL PRECEPTS

Tainah Biela Dias

1. Introduction

One of the greatest challenges for scholars in the field of religious studies today is to understand the complex dynamics and roles that religions play in the construction of subjectivities of the most different social groups, including those that religious discourses and practices have historically oppressed.

This article aims to emphasise the different ways in which the Christian LGBTQI+ communities in Brazil attempt to empower themselves. It aims to provide resources to the LGBTQI+ community that suffers stigmatisation and exclusion in religious contexts by having a dialogue with perspectives that present possibilities based on queer hermeneutics of the Bible.

Religion, especially Christianity, plays an important role in oppressing LGBTQI+ individuals through discourses and denominations that constantly delegitimise their lives. Homosexuality is a term in

dispute that involves religious condemnatory narratives and new and humanising approaches towards LGBTQI+ identities.[44] Considering this, I will emphasise the role of the new affirming religious groups to describe how the LGBTQI+ community is following and creating its own religious paths.

2. Religious Legitimisation of Heteronormativity

Brazil is not a terrible country when it comes to being LGBTQI+. It has never had any sort of *anti sodomy laws*, so it has never been a crime to be homosexual in Brazil. However, some other resources have been historically used to criminalise homosexual people. During the Brazilian dictatorship (1964–1985), it was a common allegation that LGBTQI+ people confronted a certain public morality based on the stigma of promiscuity.[45] At the end of the dictatorial period, Brazil began its political transition to a democratic regime. During this process, the organisation of new social movements aided the growth of the social demands of identity groups.

The LGBTQI+ community made important achievements, especially in the last 10 years. In 2011, the Supreme Court recognised same-sex unions, and in 2019, homophobia and transphobia were criminalised. However, in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, a right-wing conservative and homophobic politician who stands for *traditional family values*, became president. Presently, his government is strongly supported by conservatives in the name of *Christian morality*.

This *morality* refers to Butler's concept of the *heterosexual matrix* as a social construction that institutes a correlation between biological sex,

[44] See Marcelo T. Natividade, "Uma Homossexualidade Santificada? Etnografia de uma Comunidade Inclusiva Pentecostal," *Religião & Sociedade* 30, no. 2 (2010): 90–121.

[45] See Edward MacRae, *A Construção da Igualdade: Política e Identidade Homossexual no Brasil da "Abertura"* (Salvador, Brasil: EDUFBA, 2018).

gender, sexual orientation, and desire, establishing the legitimacy of heterosexuality at the same time as it creates abject subjects.[46] The normativity that makes up a certain set of norms of intelligibility within a cultural matrix is part of an *apparatus of power*.[47]

Religious discourses play an important role in legitimising the heterosexual matrix in the most diverse social contexts. Machado states that "the control of religious communities over sexual practices of its members is one of the elements which guarantee the continuity of this gendered order."[48] Duarte also highlights that the idea of *natural reproduction* is at the core of the same religious precepts.[49] This association between sexual activity and reproduction, enhanced by *biological* arguments, helps justify perceptions that LGBTI+ people are *sinners*, *deviants*, or *abnormal*.

3. Responses of LGBTQI+ Christians: Inclusive Churches

The scenario described above brings me to the following question: how is it possible to identify as LGBTQI+ and Christian? I hope to answer this question by highlighting the experience of LGBTQI+ churches in Brazil. These churches are producing hermeneutical approaches that have the potential to create new narratives and meanings

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[46] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routldge, 1990). See also Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[47] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality – Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[48] Maria D.C. Machado, "Conversão Religiosa e Opção pela Heterossexualidade em Tempos de Aids: Notas de uma Pesquisa," *Cadernos Pagu* 11 (1998), 287.

[49] See Luiz F.D. Duarte, "Ethos Privado e Justificação Religiosa: Negociações da Reprodução na Sociedade Brasileira," in *Sexualidade, Família e Ethos Religioso,* ed. Maria L. Heilborn *et al.* (Rio de Janeiro, Brasil: Garamond, 2005), 137–176.

that might deeply affect the reconstruction of LGBTQI+ people's subjectivity through empowerment. In these initiatives, misbehaviour is an epistemological stance. These churches exist because they are unwilling to accept oppressive religious precepts that regulate their bodies. They read the Bible and recognise that it is full of people who did not conform to social expectations, including Jesus himself.

The first initiative for the LGBTQI+ people, which arose as a religious denomination, was the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), founded by Reverend Troy Perry in the U.S. in 1968. Many researchers have noted MCC as a prominent religious alternative to LGBTQI+ Christians.[50]

Presently in Brazil, though it is possible to find several LGBTQI+ churches with different theological and doctrinal convictions, what all of them have in common is the recognition of the dignity of LGBTQI+ people and their rights as people of faith. These churches exist because people who identify as LGBTQI+ are aware that they are not welcome in other Christian churches, so they create spaces for themselves. In addition to creating their own separate safe environments, they produce tensions at the boundaries of religious inclusivity.

For my own research, I have been interviewing the leadership and members of the MCC in three cities located in different parts of Brazil: São Paulo and Teresina. A common understanding among the respondents is the idea that MCC is a *place to be for the LGBTQI+ community*. My research will follow this path, and my efforts will be directed to comprehend the meaning of this notion.

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[50] See Melissa Wilcox, *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity & Community* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003).

4. Producing a Sexual Theology from the Margins

In 2019, an Anglican Church in Brazil organised the *Congress for Churches and the LGBTI+ Community*. During a roundtable, a pastor of the MCC Brazil said that "the death of LGBTI+ people is full of theological meaning," meaning that the heteronormative[51] theological constructs of Christianity are responsible for homophobic and transphobic violence. Recognising the guilt of Christianity in this violence is, as proposed by Marcella Althaus-Reid, the first step towards true liberation.

According to Althaus-Reid, theology must move beyond the *paradigm of decency*.[52] The *heterosexual matrix*, she adds, is the basis of the Traditional Systematic Theology historically produced by Christianity. Heteronormativity is the ideology behind this form of theology, which is called Indecent Theology. The process of what Althaus-Reid names an Indecent Theology is thus precisely one of '[…] denouncing the real hard-core sexual nature of Systematic Theology while announcing gender and sexual deconstructions which […] carry precious meanings to our lives related to the sacred, and political implications of theology as ideology."[53] In these terms, LGBTQI+ Christians are pushing this indecent form of theology as they recognise and denounce the violent heteronormative core of theology and deconstruct it to build a more inclusive theology.

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[51] Heteronormativity is the term used by queer scholars to refer to a normative paradigm, which considers heterosexuality normal despite the existence of other sexual identities; it is also based on the idea of a binary gender identity (male or female) socially defined by the biological sex. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[52] Marcella M. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[53] Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 93.

We are now witnessing a movement of, as West and Goss suggested, *taking the word back*.[54] LGBTQI+ Christians are reclaiming their Christianity at the same time as they are acting as agents of transformation within it. They are challenging dominant religious power structures and taking back not only the Word but also their *spaces of appearance*[55] as Christian believers. LGBTQI+ Christians do not behave,[56] and they refuse to hate themselves.

By virtue of their mere existence, inclusive churches are a form of protest. A protest of people who reclaim Christianity for themselves, who refuse to accept heteronormative theologies. They are *doing*, *living*, and *experiencing* Christianity in a *performative* way. They are building their own faith based on their affirming and empowering readings of the Bible. They are constructing safe spaces of worship and a liveable life by reconciling with their identities as LGBTQI+ Christians.

5. Conclusion

The religious expressions of marginalised groups or individuals are necessary to avoid thinking of religion only in oppressive dimensions. Certainly, it is not possible to underestimate the power of hegemonic religious discourses regarding gender and sexuality. Such regulations are imposed in a coercive and violent way over bodies, reinforcing

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[54] Robert Goss and Mona West, *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000).

[55] Judith Butler, *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Streets: Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[56] The use of the term 'behave' is a direct reference to the contribution of Professor Charlene van der Walt – *'I won't behave myself, I won't hate myself': Harnessing the multi-coloured buttlerfly in Genesis 37 as an Izibatane icon* – to the Symposium Building Bridges towards a more Humane Society: Celebrating 25 Years of the Bridging Gaps Programme.

oppressive dynamics and disqualifying the humanity of individuals who do not fit into heterosexual patterns.

However, looking at marginal experiences and making them visible is our responsibility as researchers who care about building a more humane society. It allows us to highlight the complexity of the religious field, the unwanted resistances and the disruptive experiences that denounce the production of precarious lives by regulatory schemes. It also reveals new possible horizons for those who challenge the norms, horizons that regulate the spaces of appearance and the domains of legitimacy and illegitimacy.

LGBTQI+ Christians are *doing*, *living*, and *experiencing* Christianity in a *performative* way. They are building their own faith based on the affirming and empowering readings of the Bible and by healing their relationship with God and with themselves. They are constructing possibilities, safe spaces of worship and a liveable life by reconciling with their identity as LGBTQI+ Christians. As a researcher, I truly believe we should look more carefully at these movements of LGBTQI+ Christians.

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5

‘YOU ALWAYS HAVE THE POOR AMONG YOU’

BIBLICAL READING AND ECONOMICS

Darío Barolin

1. Introduction

Let me start this article by quoting the Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano:

> Pastor Miguel Brun told me that some years ago he was with the Indigenous people of the Paraguayan Chaco. He was part of an evangelism mission. The missionaries visited a cacique, a chieftain, who had the prestige of being very wise.
>
> The chief, a quiet fat man, listened without blinking to the religious propaganda that was read to him in the indigenous language.
>
> When the reading ended, the missionaries waited ....
>
> The tribal chief took his time. Later, he spoke out:
>
> ‘That scratches. And it scratches a lot, and scratches very well.’

And the chief added:

'But it scratches ... where it doesn't itch.'[57]

This story offers many aspects for discussion, but I would like to pick the last expression, 'But it scratches ... where it doesn't itch.' This, I feel sometimes, adequately describes our theological discourses.

If theological reflection and praxis do not engage with pressing daily issues, such as poverty and economic injustice, they scratch where it does not itch. I strongly believe that these issues should not be absent from our theological reflection and praxis. Not ignoring these issues is especially a critical aspect of an ecumenical international programme such as the Bridging Gaps programme.

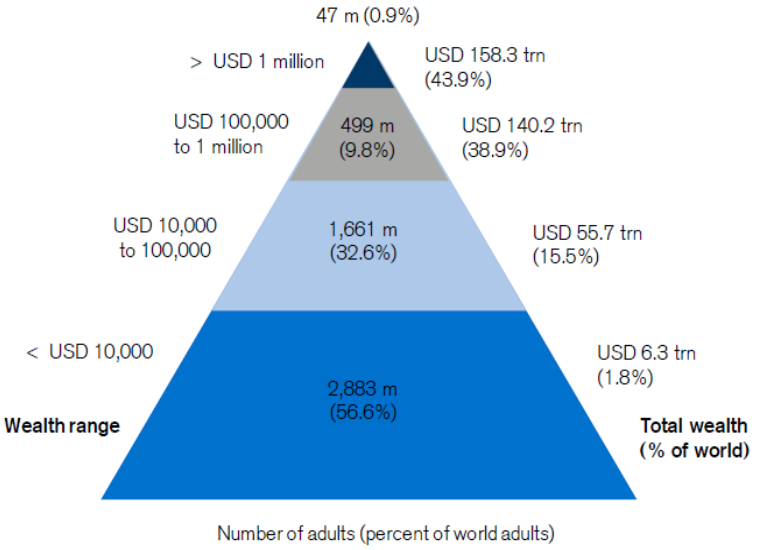
This article aims to demonstrate why poverty – which also means inequality and injustice today – should be considered one of the key issues in theological reflection and God's mission. First, I will share some numbers about what is described by the Accra Confession as the 'scandalous world.' Second, I will argue that poverty is not just an economic matter but also a theological one. Third, I will share two examples of how to engage in a dialogue between economics and theology.

2. We Live in a 'Scandalous World'

In 2004, the Accra Confession declared that we live in a 'Scandalous world that denies God's call to life for all.' Today, there are even more reasons to affirm this statement. The figure below shows the global

[57] Eduardo Galeano, *El Libro de los abrazos* (Madrid: Siglo veintiuno, 1989), 16.

income according to the 'Global Wealth Report 2019' made by the Research Institute of the Credit Suisse (October 2019).[58]



Source: James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas and Anthony Shorrocks, Global wealth databook 2019

The Global Wealth Pyramid 2019

According to this report, the top tier of the pyramid

> …remain relatively small in size – 0.9% of all adults in 2019 – but increasingly dominant in terms of total wealth ownership and their share of global wealth. The aggregate wealth of HNW [high net worth] adults has grown nearly four-fold from USD 39.6 trillion in 2000 to USD 158.3 trillion in 2019, and the share

[58] "Research Institute: Global Wealth Report 2019," Credit Suisse Group, accessed June 17, 2021, https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/global-wealth-report-2019-en.pdf.

> of global wealth has risen from 34% to 44% over the same period.[59]

When we focus on Latin America a little bit, we will find that:

> Inequality is a historical and structural characteristic of Latin American and Caribbean societies that has been maintained and reproduced even in periods of economic growth and prosperity. Although there has been significant progress in the last 15 years, Latin America and the Caribbean remains the most unequal region in the world, above Sub-Saharan Africa (the second most unequal region), and has an average Gini index almost a third higher than that of Europe and Central Asia. [60]

According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change will aggravate and deteriorate this situation in the coming years. Poverty affects people according to age, gender, race, and location. In 2018,

- Four out of five people below the international poverty line lived in rural areas.
- Half of the poor were children. Women represented the majority of the poor in most regions and among some age groups. About 70 percent of the global poor who are aged 15 and over have had no schooling or only some basic education.
- Almost half of the poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa lived in just five countries: Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Madagascar.

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[59] Credit Suisse Group, "Research Institute," 9–10.

[60] "Panorama Social de América Latina," Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 13, accessed October 16, 2019, https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/44395/11/S1900051_es.pdf.

- More than 40 percent of the global poor lived in economies affected by fragility, conflict, and violence, a number that is expected to rise to 67 percent in the next decade. These economies have just 10 percent of the world's population.
- About 132 million of the global poor lived in areas with a high flood risk.[61]

In September 2019, the president of the Rural Association of Uruguay spoke about poverty and unequal income:

> While we can all agree that extreme inequality is undesirable, the reality is that income inequality will always exist because of human nature itself, and it is fair that it should. People are all different, we have different life goals, different attitudes and skills, and we act and work accordingly. Differences exist and will always exist between people, and therefore in income, which cannot and should not be the same.[62]

Unequal income, according to the president, is a natural and private matter. Some charity may be needed, but not more than that. According to his understanding, the upper classes should pay less taxes so that the economy may grow and, finally, flow over to everyone.

The rationale that supports this gap between the rich and the poor is rooted in a concept of development that understands inequality as a short-term issue in the process of development. What has been known as the 'Kuznets curve' is, by large, the most popular theory behind this. In

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[61] "Poverty," The World Bank, accessed October 9, 2020, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview.

[62] 'Presidente de la ARU: "Aunque todos podemos estar de acuerdo en que la desigualdad extrema no es deseable, la realidad es que la desigualdad de ingresos va a existir siempre",' La Diaria Política, accessed June 17, 2021, https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/ 2020/9/presidente-de-la-aru-aunque-todos-podemos-estar-de-acuerdo-en-que-la-desigualdad-extrema-no-es-deseable-la-realidad-es-que-la-desigualdad-de-ingresos-va-a-existir-siempre/.

1955, when optimism was high about the direction the United States economy was taking, especially after the Second World War, when the differences between the rich and the poor sharply declined, Kuznets presented his theory in an article called 'Economic growth and income inequality.'[63]

His theory basically proposes that inequality increases during the initial process of an economy's industrialisation, since only a few receive its benefits. However, when this process advances, and the benefits start to 'spill over' and reach larger portions of the population, inequality decreases. The level of inequality, according to Kuznets, can be imagined as an inverted U, growing at the beginning and then decreasing. However, Thomas Piketty dismantles this theory:

> The magical Kuznets curve theory was formulated in large part for the wrong reasons, and its empirical underpinnings were extremely fragile. The sharp reduction in income inequality that we observe in almost all the rich countries between 1914 and 1945 was due above all to the world wars and the violent economic and political shocks they entailed (especially for people with large fortunes). It had little to do with the tranquil process of intersectoral mobility described by Kuznets.[64]

Piketty goes even further to affirm that inequality is at the very heart of capitalism. The better capitalism works, the greater the level of inequality. According to Piketty, there are convergent forces – such as education, technology, and so on – that tend to reduce the gap between the poor and the rich. However, there are also divergent forces that are infinitely more powerful and further the levels of economic inequality.

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[63] Simon Kuznets, "Economic Growth and Income Inequality," *The American Economic Review* XLV, no. 1 (1955): 1–28.

[64] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 15.

In contemporary societies, economic and social inequalities are thus not collateral to the system but its intrinsic dynamic.

To conclude, we live in a scandalous world, one that condemns millions of people to poverty and increases the gains of a few unprecedentedly. Certainly, economic injustices are a complex and long-standing issue, and we need much more than slogans to fight it. Nevertheless, we should be clear about the fact that, today, poverty and wealth are neither natural issues nor private matters – they are structural injustices.

3. Christians Living in a Scandalous World

3.1 Is There Space for Theology?

As Piketty points out, inequality, in addition to being a result of strictly economic factors, is also closely interlinked with values and spirituality:

The history of inequality is shaped by the way economic, social, and political actors view what is just and what is not, as well as by the relative power of those actors and the collective choices that result.[65]

If so, what kind of values nurture an inequality-producing economic system? What kind of spirituality, theology, or religion supports the exclusion and death of millions in favour of a few? What kind of spiritually promotes this 'scandalous work'? How does it impact our faith?

Certainly, the Accra Confession is right when it says the following:

> We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of

[65] Piketty, *Capital*, 20.

> neoliberal economic globalization and therefore we confess before God and one another.[66]

Also, the concept of economic development not only involves the economic system itself. It is also determined by the vision of the future that human societies perceive and desire for themselves. According to Alfonso Dubois, 'When we establish the priorities of what we understand by development, ultimately, we are only affirming what is our vision of what we want our future to be.'[67] In this sense, theology forms a necessary part of this discussion, for although there are technical aspects of economics that are foreign to theology as a discipline, the vision of human beings, their sense of life, and their relationship with the rest of creation and their future are not.

If economics is related to the values and expectations that offer support and also generate a certain spirituality, we, as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, must seriously engage in this interaction between theology and economics. But how can we, as theologians, have a dialogue with economists?

Jung Mo Sung has presented an excellent synthesis of how theology has engaged with economics. He presents two positions, of which the first is divided into two subgroups:

1. A critique of the economy based on religious values or doctrines.
    a. Within this group, he places a critique that considers economics as something not theological but a field

[66] "The Accra Confession," World Communion of Reformed Churches, 15, accessed June 17, 2021, http://wcrc.ch/accra/the-accra-confession.

[67] "Un concepto de desarrollo para el siglo XXI," *Revista Asuntos económicos y administrativos* 8 (2002): 3.

where '... social teachings derived from theological doctrine are applied.'[68]

b. The other subgroup understands economics as a theological issue but approaches it from a utopian horizon that does not recognise the limitations of the factors of production.[69]

2. Religion and economy from the reproduction of concrete life: 'This group adopts as a starting point the notion of production and reproduction of life, which is prior to religion and the economy.'[70]

Jung Mo Sung, following his predecessors (Franz Hinkelammert, Julio de Santa Ana, Hugo Assmann, and so on), categorises himself into the second group. For him, the articulation of the economic and the theological is that any economic system needs a spirituality that supports, values, and justifies it. At the same time, as I mentioned before, any economic system will necessarily nurture a kind of spirituality, theology, or religion, and vice versa.

It is necessary to become aware of the relationship between economic models and their impact on human subjectivity. A social system that has as its central element the maximisation of economic gains enhances interpersonal relationships equally based on the use of other people and the rest of creation, considering them mere objects to

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[68] Sung, 'Economía y religion: ¿dos caras de la misma moneda?' *Concilium* 343, (2011), 677.

[69] Theology cannot approach this dialogue with any kind of recipe, taken from isolated biblical texts, and pretend to state how to resolve complex and interwoven aspects of producing the necessary goods and distributing them in the right way. Nor can it offer a utopian horizon and measure from which emerges the possibility of a different economy.

[70] Sung, op. cit. 680.

be used in the pursuit of personal benefits and pleasure, objects to be discarded after exploiting them to attain what is desired.

In this way, religion and economy are interwoven aspects of the production and reproduction of life. Every economic system includes a spiritual, theological, or religious understanding of human beings and society.

3.2 Theological and Economic Place

A first insight that we may bring to have an enriching dialogue between economics and theology is the place from where we live out our discipleship of Jesus Christ, the place from where we do theology and with whom. Reading from the perspective of the victims is one of the key aspects of liberation theology, especially in the work of Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino. It is not the source of our faith, but this location, in a profound sense, offers new insights and perspectives.[71]

For Jon Sobrino, it is clear that the place for doing theology is the place of the crucified. He explains it as follows:

> The cross is everything but a metaphor. It means death and cruelty, to which the cross of Jesus adds innocence and helplessness. To the Christian theologians the cross refers us to Jesus of Nazareth. He is the crucified. Therefore, when we call the poor of this world crucified people they are taken out of anonymity, and at the same time they are granted maximum dignity.[72]

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[71] See: Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación* (Madrid: Trotta, 1990); Jon Sobrino, *Jesús en América Latina: Su significado para la fe y la cristología* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1995); Jon Sobrino, *La fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las víctimas* (Madrid: Trotta, 2007).

[72] Jon Sobrino "Epílogo," in *Bajar de la cruz a los pobres: Cristología de la liberación,* ed. José María Vigil, Comisión Teológica Internacional de la

4. Reading from the Perspective of Victims

4.1 Matthew 20:1-16

Let me start with a small example. Matthew 20:1-16, The Workers in the Vineyard, is a biblical text that, in the many communities where we have read and studied it, has caused a real headache. This parable speaks of labourers hired at different moments of the day by a vineyard owner, labourers to whom the owner pays the same amount at the end of the day, not considering the number of hours they worked, an act that surprises and makes those who worked the whole day 'grumble.'

The readers of Matthew 20:1-16 who read it from the perspective of the first workers – those who were hired earlier and thus expected a higher payment – are shocked. Those workers believe that the more they work, the more they will earn – a rule we will find in any basic economics handbook. However, the attitude of the vineyard owner disturbs and challenges these expectations when he decides to pay all the workers the same, to the joy of some workers and the annoyance of others.

I had an experience that invited me to read this text from the perspective of the victims — the crucified. At the beginning of the 1990s, during my daily bus journey to my work in Buenos Aires, I used to pass a square where I would see workers always waiting for their day's work. One day, I talked to them, and that helped me understand this biblical text. While I was talking to them, a truck was just leaving with several workers, and one of the workers who was still waiting there told me this, his head lowered: 'How lucky they are! They already know that their family will eat tonight.'

From that place, beginning from the perspective of those left in the square – and not from the perspective of the ones that already went to

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Asociación Ecuménica de Teólogos/as del Tercer Mundo (Mexico D.F.: Dabar, 2007), 295.

work – the text offers another reading, another vision. Even more, only when the text is read from that location does it make sense. Certainly, economics and theology have to look at those '… who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But we cannot forget the needs and sorrows of those who remain there, in the square, waiting in anguish for what their family will eat at night. We cannot ignore the pain that accompanies from having nothing for the table at home or the tremendous psychosocial consequences it entails.

From that place, from those who are unemployed, we must do theology and economics. All people – those who have work and those who do not – each and every one has basic needs that must be met and that cannot be just a 'privilege' of those who have work. The sense of grace that appears in the decision of the 'owner of the vineyard' cannot be absent and is vital to incorporate in our theological and economic thinking.

4.2 Calvin's View on Loans and Interest

A second example that shows how theology and economics can interact concerns how we see one of the most critical issues in finance: the charging of interest. Today, as never before, humanity is capable of producing so much wealth, thanks to its knowledge and technological advances. However, far from being an opportunity for humanity and the rest of the creation of God, knowledge and technological advances are largely used to serve the petty interest of attaining unlimited capital. Moreover, the system works from the position of those having the capital to lend, not from those who need it to produce or even survive.[73]

In this way, a loan becomes a mechanism for appropriating others' assets, and even their lives, through interest rates (usurious or not) that

[73] Joseph's story shows a pretty clear example of using knowledge and technology to appropriate other people's resources. Pharaoh and Joseph save the population from starving but, at the same time, they also use their resources to enslave them. See Genesis 41:25-32.

render the loan unpayable. In ancient times, high interest charges that caused the loss of all but a few owned assets and even one's freedom itself were quite common. Amos 2: 6-7a illustrates quite graphically the appropriation of the other through the credit system, and even more so if the system that administers justice is an ally of the lender (Isaiah 32: 7).

In light of this, it is not strange that we find in the Bible a condemnation of this kind of practice: the texts of Exodus 22:25 and Deuteronomy 23:19 (see also: Leviticus 25: 35-38; Psalm 15: 5; Ezekiel 18:13).

If the offered loan is not based on the needs of those requesting it, but instead exclusively on the lender's need to make a profit, the loan is no longer a tool of social cohesion, of giving new opportunities – it is instead a part of a system that expropriates the resources of the vulnerable.

It is relevant to bring in John Calvin's understanding of credit here. I find in him a clear reading of this issue from the perspective of the poor. Calvin's understanding of loans with interest breaks from that of his predecessors. He established seven restrictions central to his view on this issue.[74]

Calvin understands that the condemnation in the biblical texts of charging interest is based on loans destined for subsistence or to alleviate suffering in the face of a crisis, and not to produce more wealth. In those cases, he affirms, 'No one should charge interest to the poor or force him to pay interest if he is in utter need or visited by misfortune.'

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[74] His view on loans may be found in Calvin's letter to a banker, *Claude de Sachin* (John Calvin, *Calvin's Ecclesiastical Advice* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 139–43) and his commentaries on Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 23, Psalm 15 and Ezekiel 18. André Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin* (Geneve: Georg University, 2008), 453–476.

In other words, wealth should not be used to expropriate from those in vulnerable situations. On the contrary, the obligation of Christians is to be in solidarity with those in need, a gesture that honours the glory of God (2nd restriction).

However, Calvin acknowledges that there are other types of loans where the money is not destined for mere survival but for wealth generation. It thus seems lawful for the lender to benefit from the gain. For these loans, there are also a series of restrictions that aim to ensure that the credit does not become a boomerang that ends up hurting the one who requests it (3rd to 5th restriction).

Finally, there is also a strong emphasis in Calvin's view that credit is not a mere private transaction but should instead be framed for the common good. In his sixth restriction, Calvin states the following:

We should not consider only the personal benefit of those with whom we deal, but also what is useful for the common good must be taken into account. Because it is quite obvious that the interest paid by a merchant is a public rate.

Although Calvin accepts the charge of interest when the loan is used to create wealth, he frames and restricts it in a network of protection for the person requesting the credit, on the one hand, and in search of the common good, on the other. Today, it is particularly essential to work on strictly regulating the financial market because of the tremendous impact it has as a legal mechanism to unfairly appropriate profits.

5. Conclusion

I began by arguing for the relevance of poverty and inequality in our theological reflections and pastoral practices. Then, I described why poverty and inequality are both economical theological matters. Religion and economy are interwoven aspects of the production and reproduction of life. Every economic system carries a theological or religious

understanding of human beings and society. Every theology enhances the production and distribution of goods.

Following the proposal of theologian and economist Jung Mo Sung, I thus proposed the need for a multidisciplinary approach. His method may give us a proper space to work and dialogue with other disciplines and approaches.

Latin American liberation theology challenges us about the location from where we should work. We should locate ourselves in the perspective of the victims, the crucified of this world.

Finally, I presented two examples of the possible interaction between theologians and economics. The proposed reading of Matthew 20: 1-16, 'The Workers in the Vineyard' and John Calvin's approach to the subject of loans and interest are clear and concrete examples of theological and economic thinking from the perspective of those in need and the vulnerabilised.

I strongly believe that Jesus' words to his disciples – 'You always have the poor among you' – offer a crucial reminder to theology and mission today – at least if we want to scratch where it itches.

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6

DOING THEOLOGY FROM THE PLACE OF THE IMPOVERISHED:

A RESPONSE TO DARÍO BAROLÍN

Charl E. Fredericks

1. Introduction

Allow me to start this article by thanking and congratulating the founders and co-workers of the Bridging Gaps Programme and the organisers of this symposium, titled 'Building bridges towards a more humane society: Celebrating 25 years of the Bridging Gaps Programme.'

I also thank Dr Darío Barolin for his article and for sharing his views with us.

I will make three points in response to Barolin's contribution. First, I will contextualise the phrase 'scandalous world' for the South African context. Second, I will propose an appreciation for the perspective of impoverished people, and for doing theology from the perspective of the victim. Third, I will advocate for the inclusion of the perspective of impoverished people in the dialogue between theology and economics.

I do not consider my response to be a standard theological response. My work and experience over the past 20 years has been in the field of the social development work of religious networks, with greater attention to the work of churches in the alleviation of poverty, the provision of primary healthcare, and the education and training of persons. My response is guided by this experience.

2. A Contextualisation of a 'Scandalous World' for South Africa

I agree with Dr Barolín that we are living in a scandalous world, a world that condemns millions of persons to live in poverty. It is in this context that we are called upon to reflect and act.

In South Africa, when we speak about our challenges as a nation, three challenges are often mentioned: poverty, inequality, and unemployment. It has been estimated that close to 20% of our population – one out of five persons – lives in poverty.[75]

Inequality was inherited from our colonial past due to the policy of apartheid, which excluded a large portion of the population from accessing equal economic opportunities. However, inequality (regarding income) in South Africa has deepened during the twenty-five years of democracy from 1994 to 2019. The top 20% of our population earns almost 70% of our income.[76]

The elevated inequality levels are fuelled by high unemployment levels. The unemployment rate in South Africa stands at 23%, with

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[75] "Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune," World Bank, accessed October 13, 2020, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34496/9781464816024.pdf.

[76] "Six Charts Explain South Africa's Inequality," International Monetary Fund, accessed February 11, 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/01/29/na012820six-charts-on-south-africas-persistent-and-multi-faceted-inequality.

almost one out of four persons being unemployed.[77] In particular, 52% of young persons – one out of two young persons – between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are unemployed.

This is my context – the context in which I am called upon to reflect and act.

Poverty does not exist by chance as an accidental consequence of an economic system. Poverty, as Barolín states, is a structural issue, as systems are structured to achieve such an intended outcome. Our actions in response to poverty must be structured and coordinated if we are to alleviate poverty, if we are to reduce poverty, and if we are to eradicate poverty.

3. Appreciation for the Perspective of Impoverished Persons: Doing Theology from the Place of the Victim

I appreciate the act of reading the biblical text from the place of the victim. First, Barolín refers to the place from where we do theology, and then refers to the person with whom we do theology.

In the context of poverty, I hope that this act of reading the text from the victim's place will allow us, first, to read the text and reflect on what the text means to an impoverished[78] person. Second, I hope that this act enables us to read the text with an impoverished person and to reflect on what the text means to an impoverished person.

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[77] "Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Second Quarter 2020: Report, Statistics South Africa Statistical Release P0211," Statistics South Africa, accessed September 30, 2020, http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2020.pdf.

[78] An input from Maria León during the symposium proposed the use of the term 'impoverished' instead of 'poor' to indicate that people are made poor and kept poor.

This act calls for an appreciation of impoverished people, not merely as victims but as fellow believers who read the text and who attempt to interpret the text for their context. The impoverished are people who reflect and who wish to act to reduce their poverty.

This act calls for joint reflection and action with the impoverished people, not only as beneficiaries of efforts to address poverty, but also as recognised partners and co-workers in the efforts to address their poverty.

I am convinced that attempts to relieve poverty cannot be limited to our appeals to the rich to assist the impoverished. Attempts to relieve poverty must involve the impoverished themselves, who must also become responsible for the actions taken to address their poverty.

In my experience, the impoverished possesses knowledge of their poverty-stricken context. They understand the actions that contribute to harsher poverty as well as the actions that alleviate poverty. Joint reflection and action with the impoverished as part of community development programmes involves attempts to design poverty-alleviation projects with inputs from the local people in the geographic areas where the projects will be implemented. Local religious networks, churches, community leaders, and community members are approached. This consultation with local networks and people during project design is sustained during project implementation. Such an approach enables the impoverished to share their ideas on poverty-alleviation during project design, and to provide feedback during project implementation on the proposed actions, which will lead to more effective project implementation.

The inputs from the impoverished have included proposals to minimise cultural stigma and discrimination when a service is received, in order to allow the impoverished to access a service with respect to their human dignity. The composition of material support and nutritional support packages has been adjusted, with high value placed on the

inputs from the impoverished, who are treated as beneficiaries and recognised partners in the efforts to address their poverty. This approach differs from projects designed by project specialists who consider only themselves qualified to determine the needs of the impoverished and how to adequately respond to them.

4. Include the Perspective of Impoverished Persons in the Dialogue between Theology and Economics

I acknowledge the need for dialogue between theology and economics, as presented by Barolín. There are also disciplines other than theology that analyse and attempt to explain our context. Doing theology in context calls for a dialogue with other disciplines to gain a better understanding of our context.

Barolín offers a practical example: the charge of interest when loans are issued. One would agree with the removal of interest charges when loans are issued to the impoverished for subsistence and in search of the common good. When we appeal to their conscience, bankers may even appreciate the merits of this idea. However, when they consider its impact on their profits, they may also struggle with it.

Once again, my request is to continue with reflection and to present our reflections during our engagements with the bankers. My request is also to involve the impoverished as clients of the banks when we request that interest charges be removed when issuing loans to them – an appeal to the reputation and status of banks.

Engaging with impoverished people as partners in development is important. Without it, we may return to this discussion in five years' time, only to find that poverty and inequality have increased – an extremely possible scenario if we also consider the future impact of disease and climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that the impoverished are more severely affected by it than the rest of

society. Studies also indicate that they will experience a greater share of the negative impacts of climate change.

Conclusion

I thus conclude my response with an appeal to read biblical texts and do theology from the place of the impoverished and also with the impoverished. Only then can we sustainably alleviate poverty, reduce poverty, and eradicate poverty.

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7

HUMAN DIMENSION OF HEALING THROUGH CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY

Funlọla O. Ọlọjẹde

1. Introduction: Trauma as a Shared Human Experience

Mary-Luz Reyes Bejarano has offered us a glimpse into the situation in Colombia, where armed conflict has produced at least six million victims of violence in the last few decades. A helpful response on the part of the church to the unspeakable trauma that the survivors have endured, we have learnt, is the introduction of Contextual Bible Reading (CBS), which has demonstrated, in Bejarano's words, that the Bible is "a therapeutic resource and our instrument of our struggle for justice." From her summary, four key words emerge – context, trauma, Bible, and healing – that call for further reflections.

First, Bejarano's lecture showed us the importance of context in conducting our tasks as theologians and Christians. No doubt, every context has its own challenges, but sometimes, the challenges we consider peculiar to a context are, in fact, not so unique. Rather, they are human problems that are replicated in other contexts with comparable

histories or trajectories. Although trauma has become, in a sense, part of Columbia's post-conflict experience, both experience and research have shown that trauma is a common human suffering, especially in contexts that have witnessed significant disruption of lives and property through conflict. The Colombian situation simply signifies not just our shared pain but our innate propensity to collectively overcome that pain.

Speaking of the South African context, for instance, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, the distinguished professor of trauma studies, has affirmed that collective trauma generally characterises life in deeply divided societies that have emerged from violent conflict. What is needed after mass trauma in such societies, she argues, is empathic repair.[79] According to Gobodo-Madikizela, empathic repair is "the language of mutuality that invites not only recognition of the other but also the responsibility that calls each of us to participate in the rebuilding of our post-conflict societies and to share in the vision of human solidarity." It stems from "empathic human connection... a deep sense of caring for the other," which, she says, is "deeply embedded in most traditional African societies."[80] One could say, in the same vein, that such an empathic connection is also deeply embedded in the Christian ethos.

2. Contextual Bible Study: A South African Experience

Like Colombia, South Africa is one of such societies that needs not only emphatic repair but also what De Wit and López refer to as

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[79] Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, "Empathic Repair after Mass Trauma: When Vengeance Is Arrested," *European Journal of Social Theory* 11 (2008): 331–350. Cf. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, "Moral Imagination: Stories that Inspire a Quest for Change," in *Teaching for Change: Essays on Pedagogy, Gender and Theology in Africa*, ed. Juliana L. Claassens, Charlene van der Walt, and Funlọla O. Ọlọjẹde (Stellenbosch, South Africa: African SUN MeDIA, 2019), 1–12.

[80] Gobodo-Madikizela, "Moral Imagination," 12.

'collective therapy.'[81] It is therefore not surprising that the idea of CBS is championed by Gerald West in South Africa, a nation that has undergone its own share of historical trauma. In South Africa, West states, "the realities of violence against women summoned" CBS work.[82] In other words, according to West, the African context summoned the biblical context – the context invited the text to a dialogue.

In the last three decades, the Ujaama Centre for Community Development and Research at the University of KwaZuluNatal has used the CBS approach to read the Bible with several poor and marginalised communities in South Africa and beyond. CBS, among other things, has been used to address the prevalent issues of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS, as the Bible is read with ordinary readers, many of whom had experienced various forms of trauma in (post)apartheid South Africa. For instance, in the context of the endemic incidence of rape in South Africa, the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 has been used as the basis for a CBS and read with women in small groups. The story offers rape survivors both a safe space and a sacred vocabulary to express their trauma, like Tamar, who refused to be silenced by her abusers but publicly acknowledged her rape.[83] Additionally, Tamar's story has been

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[81] Hans De Wit and Edgar Antonio López, "Introducción," in *Lectura Intercultural de la Biblia en Contextos de Impunidad en América Latina*, ed. Hans de Wit & Edgar Antonio López (Bogotá, Colombia: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2013), 17–21.

[82] Gerald O. West, "Tamar Summons Jesus: A Trans-Textual (2 Samuel 13:1-22, Mark 5:22-43, Matthew 20:17-34) Search for Sectorial Solidarity with Respect to Gender and Masculinity," in *Transgression and Transformation: Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer Biblical Interpretation as Creative Interventions*, ed. Juliana Claassens, Christl M. Maier, and Funlọla O. Ọlọjẹde (London: T & T Clark, 2021), 184–203.

[83] Gerald O. West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, "The Bible Story that Became a Campaign: The Tamar Campaign in South Africa (and Beyond)," *Ministerial Formation* (June 2004): 1–12.

read complementarily to construct alternative masculinities, that is, from the perspective of men as perpetrators of rape or violence against women. Such readings encourage men to be not only sensitive to but also accountable for their actions.[84]

It is in the same sense, I would say, that the ground realities in Colombia also engendered CBS work. Bejarano has shown us that CBS is a way of ministering pastoral care to survivors of violence in Colombia because it allows the Bible to speak directly to their lives. In Colombia, CBS work has confirmed not only the necessity of combining theory with praxis but also – according to the personal testimonies of the workshop participants – the positive outcome of the interaction between the two.

3. The Human Component in the Effectiveness of CBS

However, I wish to stress a significant but often understated component of CBS and of using the Bible as a resource for people living with trauma and, in this case, for women living with trauma. Marcela in Bejarano's paper is quoted as saying that "[t]he reading of biblical texts came directly into my life and strengthened me." That statement and Bejarano's submission highlight the positive impact of reading biblical texts on female survivors of violence, especially gender-based violence. Without any intention of taking the cutting edge out of the Word of God, I would like to argue that, besides the Word, a major factor in the healing process is the human factor – the role of the people who take time to read the Bible with the people who have survived violent conflicts. Would these projects have obtained different outcomes if the

[84] West, "Tamar Summons Jesus," 187–189; Gerald O. West, "Reading the Bible with the Marginalised: The Value/s of Contextual Bible Reading," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1 no. 2 (2015): 235–261.

participants were asked to read the Bible individually on their own, that is, if they read alone rather than with one another? I suppose so.

I presume that the biblical texts spoke to these readers because of the empathy, the commitment, and the communitarian spirit that the people who read with them brought to the table. One of the primary core values of CBS, West reiterates, is community.[85] "Community," he writes, "is the beginning and goal of CBS":

- Community is the fabric of CBS;
- The communities of the organised poor, working-class, and other marginalised groups are the starting point and the primary "reality" of CBS;
- Community is also the primary "objective" of CBS, as CBS contributes towards the formation of redemptive communities, full of dignity, decent work, and abundant life for all.

I wish to affirm that it is the human component that makes the reading of the text meaningful. In Acts 8:30-31, we read that "…Philip ran to the chariot [the Ethiopian eunuch] and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked. 31 'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?"' The presence of another, not necessarily of a priest, makes a difference in the act of reading and to the reader. It is little wonder also that the apostle Paul declared thus to the Corinthian church: "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone" (2 Cor 3:2). In other words, the written text becomes meaningful because of the 'living text.'

[85] The six core values agreed on by CBS practitioners internationally are Community, Criticality, Collaboration, Change, Context, and Contestation. See West, "Reading the Bible with the Marginalised," 238.

3.1 Bridging Gaps as a Human Component in CBS

In my view, it is regarding this human component that the Bridging Gaps programme has made its greatest impact. The programme embodies human connection and communion. My own experience of the programme underscores my point that the context matters, the text matters, but that the 'living text' also matters. In the last quarter of 2009, I was in the Netherlands, participating in the Bridging Gaps programme with a group of 13 other friends from different parts of the developing world. As part of the programme design, I was scheduled to visit three congregations with a different colleague during my three-month stay in the Netherlands. We were to observe and participate in the worship services of those churches and share our experiences with the group.

The first church I visited was in Geldermalsen, where Pastor Johan and his wife, who had adopted three siblings (including a set of twins) from Africa, presided. My Bridging Gaps colleague Allison and I were taken straight away to watch that year's Fruit Parade, and we later spent the night at the home of one of the women, Corrie, who vacated her bed for us. It was an unforgettable experience – of being in a likewise community of people of faith in another country and culture.

During the weekend at another church in Huissen, our host Jan, together with church members José and Piet took my good friend and brother, Rudolfo, from Cuba, and me on a sightseeing tour, which included a visit to the popular Openluchtmuseum. I was touched again when, later at night, Thea, who hosted me, vacated her bed for me to have a comfortable night's sleep. The service the following morning was uplifting, the choir rendering special songs to welcome us. Later, we visited Pastor Johan and his wife at home, where he presented me with an old Old Testament book from his shelf. To my surprise, when I opened the book later in the week in Amsterdam, I discovered that he and his wife had hidden a €100 bill and a note of encouragement inside.

The last church was the Lutheran Church of Arnhem, which Vinod and I visited on a day trip. It was different from the others because of its vibrant youth population, but the hospitality was no different, as the church received us ever so warmly.

The uncommon hospitality and kindness my colleagues and I received from these congregations remain engraved in my heart. Strangely, I find it hard to recall any of the sermons that were preached in those services or the texts that were read. But I remember those living epistles, known and read by us, whose offerings brought us to the Netherlands from different parts of the globe in an attempt to close some of the gaps that divide and estrange us as members of the human race.

4. Conclusion

In the act of reading the text together, it is the human element that makes reading memorable and that produces lasting healing. As we continue to read and listen to the text with others like or unlike us, with the wounded and the whole, as well as with those who have succumbed to the new waves of trauma that have emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to keep in mind that it is both the ethos and the pathos that get the job done. Remarkably, CBS offers resources that incorporate and address issues of context, trauma, the Bible, and healing. Thus, as we continue to seek meaning out of the written text, meaningfully engaging with fellow 'living texts' will also engender healings for trauma in our various contexts.

In closing, I would like to congratulate Prof Hans de Wit, the Bridging Gaps visionary himself, on the 25th anniversary of the programme. I appreciate his commitment to social justice and to bridging socio-economic, theological, and academic gaps through this programme. Many thanks to him and the Bridging Gaps team for the opportunity of a lifetime that they have given hundreds of us who have gone through this programme to grow as theologians and, more

importantly, as humans. The text means so much more because of people like them.

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8

THE STRANGE PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS

TAMAR AND BATHSHEBA, A CONTEXTUAL RE-READING OF THEIR STORIES FROM INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM WITH A FOCUS ON SEXUAL ABUSE

Melissa Rosales

1. Introduction

This research conducts a feminist re-reading of the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, highlighting the importance of the strange presence of women in a biblical genealogy, especially in Christ's family tree. This research will look at the complicated stories of Tamar and Bathsheba and the intersectionality of their discriminations and oppressions, with a special focus on the violence and sexual abuse they are made to endure.

This research will use the lens of an Ecuadorian woman whose reality is permeated by gender inequality. In Ecuador, it is extremely common for a woman's body to be objectified, hypersexualised, and abused. The motivation behind this research is to find similar voices and

stories of similar women in biblical texts. These can serve as an example, and even as an improvement, for women who go through the same today.

Tamar and Bathsheba's stories are complex. Both stories have sexual abuse as a common factor, however both are conditioned by the patriarchal society of biblical times. Therefore, the research problem is based on the lack of attention given to the fact that the abuse of their bodies is not so evident to the readers of the text. It does not cause any alarming reactions in the readers, and it is thus not a topic that is discussed in Christian communities, even though such a topic is the daily bread of a society like Ecuador, where gender violence is a daily reality, along with the hypersexualisation and objectification of women, as well as the guilt that falls on them, making them believe that it is women who are responsible for these situations.

This research conducted a qualitative literature review using the Ecuadorian feminist lenses from intersectionality to search for the context of the biblical story, looking at the pre-text, and then looking at the text to focus on the characters and their roles in the story. All of this is in connection to the daily reality of Ecuadorian women.

The main research question is as follows: What are the implications for the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 after the strange presence of women like Tamar and Bathsheba, and their stories, when reread through a feminist intersectional lens and by focusing on sexual abuse?

In addition, I will answer the following question: What implications does this bring to the current Ecuadorian context, where women constantly suffer sexual violence and gender inequality?

2. Genealogy of Matthew 1

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy, stressing that Jesus comes from the family lines of Abraham and David. He tries to position Jesus socially, religiously, and politically.

According to Charles Perrot, the relevance of genealogies comes from nomadism and the function of the tribes, which became stronger after the exile, so it was necessary to prove pure belonging to the people. This function started to decrease in Judeo-Christian communities, although it was still important to prove that Jesus fulfilled messianic expectations.[86]

At times, the genealogies became the means by which certain rights were guaranteed. Those who could be called the Children of Israel, Sandro Gallazzi affirms, were only those who could guarantee their purity, and this affected whether one would be able to have access to land,[87] which, in turn, implied not having access to a space to live, reproduce, feed, or work. They were thus dependent on others, owed them their lives, and knew that they belonged to a lower stratum.

In contrast, in Matthew's genealogy, a break with the exclusive patriarchal tradition can be seen – it includes foreigners and even women with complicated stories.

2.1 Women in Genealogy, a Strange Presence

The presence of Ruth, Tamar, Bathsheba, and Rahab in Matthew's genealogy recalls, at first glance, a breakdown of the traditional domestic order.

These women question the patterns of a patriarchal society and are, simultaneously, victims of it, having to fight for a position in society and knowing that their life depends on the decisions of the men around them. However, other points of view consider these women simple pagans, question their decisions, and see them as examples of how a woman should not be. For example, according to Claude (2006), Rahab is a

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[86] Charles Perrot, *Los Relatos de la Infancia de Jesús* (Navarra, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1980), 18.

[87] Sandro Gallazzi, "Jubileo, ¡Aquí y Ahora!," *Revista de Interpretación Biblica Latinoamericana* 33 (1999): 68.

simple prostitute, Tamar is the one who plays at being a prostitute, Bathsheba is an adulteress, and Ruth is cunning.[88]

Unlike other matriarchs like Sarah and Rebecca, these women express a critical attitude towards their realities, especially towards marriage. Furthermore, as Imtraud Fischer says, "[s]triking is the fact that each woman is named as the mother of her are hers and none is designated as the wife of the father of the child concerned."[89] This suggests that the genealogy writer had not only a clear purpose in involving women in the genealogy but also in the way they are involved in it.

Mercedes Lópes notes the value of the unexpected in these women, their presence that reflects a departure from the normative, their anomalous relationship with their partners, and the similarity of their situation with that of Mary and Joseph's.[90]

2.2 Theories of the Inclusion of Women

Mercedes Lópes brings together some of the theories surrounding the inclusion of women in the genealogy. According to some, the women are there because they are foreigners, functioning as a mechanism to highlight the mission towards the Gentiles; according to others, they are sinners placed there to highlight the salvific value of Jesus; and according to most theories, they are there to relate to Mary and her unusual conception.[91]

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[88] Tassin Claude, *Evangelio de Jesucristo según San Mateo* (Navarra, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2006), 8.

[89] Irmtraud Fischer, "Déjà-vu for Proving Soteriological Pertinence: Gender-Relevant Reception of the Hebrew. Bible in the Narrative Texts of the New Testament," in *Gospels Narrative and History*, ed. Navarro Mercedes and Perroni Marinella (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 73.

[90] Mercedes Lopes, "Mujeres que se inventan salidas," *Revista de Interpretación Biblica Latinoamericana* 25 (1997): 56.

[91] Lopes, "Mujeres que se inventan salidas," 55.

Matthew was also aware that these names would not go unnoticed in Israel. As Amy-Jill Levine pointed out, he even makes references to sexually suspicious relationships like that of Bathsheba, who, by appearing as Uriah's wife, brings to mind the character of the Hittite, implying that there was something murky between David and Bathsheba's relationship.[92] Is Matthew trying to say that Bathsheba is still Uriah's wife, or does he just want to remind his readers of the dark passage in David's story?

2.3 Introduction to the Stories of Tamar and Bathsheba

Samuel Pérez affirms that there are some who point out "Tamar as a selfish libertine who consents to an incestuous relationship with her father-in-law for her own benefit. They accuse Rahab as a prostitute; Ruth as a woman with few moral scruples and Bathsheba as an adulteress."[93] Likewise, Evis Carballosa compared these women with the sinfulness of the world that God came to heal, thereby quoting Paul that God came to heal the foolish, weak, and vile of the world to shame those who boast.[94]

These types of interpretations fall extremely short, viewing these women simply as the sinful, and not as the oppressed who struggle to escape that which dominates them. It can also be argued that the four women went through circumstances of sexual abuse – the only way for Ruth to escape her problems and Naomi's pressure was to sleep with Boaz ; Rahab is a prostitute in a patriarchal society that considers women an object belonging only as a means of pleasure and

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[92] Amy-Jill Levine, "The Gospel of Matthew: Between Breaking and Continuity," in *Gospels Narrative and History*, ed. Navarro Mercedes, and Perroni Marinella (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 134.

[93] Samuel Pérez, *Comentario Exegético al Texto Griego del Nuevo Testamento* (Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Clie, 2009), 98.

[94] Evis Carballosa, *Mateo, la Revelación de la Realeza de Cristo* (Grand Rapids, MI: Editorial Portavoz, 2007), 62.

reproduction; and even Mary with her totally abnormal pregnancy can be considered as such an object.

This research, for reasons of time, only focused on Tamar and Bathsheba, but it leaves open the possibility of investigating the rest of the women.

3. Re-reading Tamar's Story

For the re-reading of Tamar, the context of the women at the time of the story was first analysed, and then a literary analysis of the characters and their roles was conducted. This was done from an intersectional feminist approach, relating the problem of sexual abuse to those characteristics that placed Tamar in a disadvantaged position compared to the rest of the male characters.

3.1 Analysis of the Context of Women at Biblical Times

In a patriarchal society, being a woman means being dependent on a man for survival. According to Alicia Winters, a woman "became part of the husband's family when she married, and if the husband died, she remained part of that family, subject to the authority and protection of another male of her kindred."[95]

Tamar becomes the property of the sons of Judah, and when no one wants to procreate with her, she is returned to her family, rejected, as something that is easy to get rid of, as if she is not a human being.

This clarifies that Tamar's value lies in what she can offer to the patriarchal society, to the lineage, to the children that she could have – her value, in short, resides in her body, which is a sexual means for procreation and pleasure.

[95] Alicia Winters, "La Memoria Subversiva de una Mujer," *Revista de Interpretación Biblica Latinoamericana* 13 (1992): 80.

According to Jarschel Haidi, a woman in biblical times had lower chances of survival, since while access to land passes politically through men, it passes anthropologically through women. That is, a woman's possibility of survival depended on her body and her reproductive capacity.[96]

From the point of view of lineage, this is understandable, but as a woman, it is important to ask: Where is justice for her? While her body was getting used, especially sexually, did she at least enjoy it? Did she enjoy being the wife of several men and being used for their pleasure? Did she have pleasure?

If Tamar's narration is analysed using a contemporary lens, specifically from the view of what is considered sexual violence, it can be affirmed that what Tamar experienced was sexual abuse. Social norms favourable to male superiority and lax sanctions against violence, the Panamerican Health Organisation affirms, are aspects that support and perpetuate sexual abuse – even more so when it is considered that sexual relations are a man's right and that women are responsible for keeping men's sexual desires under control.[97]

Undoubtedly, Tamar and her worth as a woman were linked to her body, which perhaps goes from use to abuse, first at the hands of the sons of Judah and later when she makes the decision to prostitute herself with Judah to ensure her legacy. The question is, when your survival depends on your body, on the pleasure it gives, and especially on having children, what other option exists? Does sexual abuse not occur exactly because of the social pressure and even the conditioning of women in a patriarchal society?

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[96] Haidi Jarschel, "Para que la Memoria Histórica de la Resistencia de las Mujeres sea Guardada," *Revista de Interpretación Biblica Latinoamericana* 33 (1999): 37.

[97] Panamerican Health Organization, "Comprender y abordar la violencia contra las mujeres," accessed April 1, 2022, https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/20184_violenciasexual.pdf.

3.2 Literary Analysis of the Narration

It is difficult to understand the narration of a woman like Tamar, because there is no certainty that a woman's voice exists. It is most likely that Tamar, her words, and her actions came from the mind of a male writer.

As Jacqueline Lapsley says, "Where, then, is the woman in this process of male generation of texts? Certainly, women had their own dreams, personal wishes, and secrets. Can we find them embedded in these texts by male authors?"[98]

One of the most important characters in the story is Onan, who has to give his brother offspring. However, as Allen Roos says, Onan used the law of giving a son to a dead brother to intentionally gratify himself sexually, taking advantage of the situation, which is why God took his life.[99]

Despite this injustice, the text ends by showing a Tamar who decides to take the law into her own hands, to do what is not allowed, to risk her life, to get what she needs, to obtain a child and thus ensure her access to land and to life.

3.3 The Relationship between Sexual Abuse and Other Intersections of Discrimination

Tamar is a woman who finds herself in the middle of a patriarchal context, a foreigner who, as Haidi Jarschel explained, lives under a marriage system that demands moving to another clan, that demands needing a man and her family for access to land. However, she ends up as a widow, and when she is not rescued by her brother-in-law, she returns to her paternal home.[100] She has to depend on the decisions of

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[98] Jacqueline Lapsley, *Whispering the Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), XXIII.

[99] Allen Ross, *Genesis* (Puebla, Mexico: Ediciones Las Américas, s.f.), 105.

[100] Jarschel, "Para que la Memoria Histórica de la Resistencia de las Mujeres sea Guardada," 38.

her father and even Judah, who have the full right to order her to be killed.

However, if she ran this risk of being burned and killed, why did she not think of any alternative other than prostitution? According to Young-Eisendrath Polly and Wher Demaris, the fact that a woman agrees to be exploited like a piece of meat in exchange for financial support only demonstrates women's inferior status in patriarchal societies.[101] It should be clarified that this does not have to do with women who currently decide to work professionally in prostitution. Rather, it is an attempt to understand the reality of a woman in patriarchal societies of the biblical context, whose life depends on men, and whose survival crosses and overrules the value of her body.

At the same time, Tamar decides to take advantage of her position of oppression, of the dominance of men over her body, to obtain a child to ensure her future. As Nancy Cardoso says, "We see in history that the body has been the greatest space of oppression and appropriation of women: rape, aggression, denial, abuse, manipulation, idealization."[102] If her body was what attracted the most attention, the most valuable thing, if her body spoke and even shouted more than her own voice, why should she not use it to her own advantage? Why not allow the men to take possession of her body again, if they have already done so before? At least this time, she would achieve something in return, what she most desires: survival.

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[101] Polly Young-Eisendrath and Wher Demaris, "The Fallacy of Individualism and Reasonable Violence against Women," in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds. Carlson Brown Joanne and R. Bohn Carole (New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 130–131.

[102] Nancy Cardoso, "Pautas para una Hermenéutica Feminista de la Liberación," *Revista de Interpretación Biblica Latinoamericana* 25 (1997): 5.

4. Re-reading the Story of Bathsheba

Compared to Tamar's story, Bathsheba's may seem clearer in its elements of sexual abuse, as it involves the power of a king, and Bathsheba appears mostly silenced.

Even so, according to several readings, Bathsheba is an adulteress, one who is eager to be intimate with David. According to Richard Davidson, there are those who consider her a voluntary partner and others who maintain that she engaged in flirtation and was complicit in David's requesting her to come to the palace.[103]

4.1 Analysis of the Royal Context of Bathsheba

It all begins with a bath that Bathsheba takes for a purification ritual after her menstrual period. From here, it can be understood what the role of women was in this context. As Jacqueline Lapsley (2005) explained, apart from this periodical impurity, there was also her subordination under male authority and her subordination in both the domestic and public spheres.[104]

Roberto Jamienson talks about the despotic kings of the time who were infatuated with a woman and simply sent people to look for her.[105] It was extremely common that if a king like David desired a woman, he could simply take her. This reflects his royal power, using which he could obtain anything he wished, especially that which is already considered the property of men.

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[103] Richard Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no.2 (2006): 1.

[104] Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, 6.

[105] Roberto Jamieson, *Comentario Exegético y Explicativo de la Biblia Tomo I: El Antiguo Testamento* (El Paso, TX: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 2003), 292.

This power came not only from his reign but also from his relationship with the divine. According to Dionisio Ortiz, in this case, God is shown as the giver of women to both Saul and David, as a form of care by God and as a harem that is sometimes transmitted from one king to another.[106]

The relationship between David and Bathsheba, it must thus be understood, responds to a tension in which David not only implies the power of his person but that of all Israel.

4.2 Literary Analysis of the Narration

Once again, the male figures are the ones who control the narrative, who make the decisions, who violate, while the woman remains silenced.

The story of Bathsheba and David begins with him watching her as she purifies herself after her menstrual period, an 'impurity' that, according to Richard Davidson, lasted seven days and ended at dusk. If Bathsheba was bathing at that time, it was to faithfully follow the law, an action that was not part of a flirtation strategy but that of ritual cleansing. The only one who was looking at the other lustfully was David.[107]

David then sends his people to bring her to him, and she arrives at the palace. Could she have said no? Bathsheba then becomes pregnant. As Amy-Jill Levine says, the efforts to send Uriah to his home make it clear that David does not want to assume the paternity of his child.[108] Bathsheba ends up involved in a conflict of men, a conflict where one has greater power than the other, where one is capable of oppressing the other, even to the point of deciding to kill him.

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[106] Dioniso Ortiz, *Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano* (El Paso, TX: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1997),162.

[107] Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology," 5.

[108] Levine, "The Gospel of Matthew: Between Breaking and Continuity," 135.

The woman then mourns for her husband. Even this is questioned: Dionisio Ortiz wondered if her mourning was sincere or forced and affirmed with certainty that David and Bathsheba were waiting impatiently for Uriah's death so that they could finally be together.[109]

It is curious how, despite how silenced Bathsheba is in the text, her every action is being questioned: her ritual bath and the timing of it, her having gone to the palace, and even her pain in losing Uriah. She is thus silenced once again by interpretations that prefer to see her only as an unscrupulous accomplice.

4.3 Relationship between Sexual Abuse and Other Intersections of Discrimination

Bathsheba is a woman, a foreigner, a foreigner's wife, and beautiful, and all of this makes her a target of David's lust. Under the power of the great monarch, she is subordinate, with the text allowing her to speak only when she wants to convey her pregnancy.

According to Sara Koenig, she tells David about her pregnancy because she is incapable of solving the problem she is in. Her husband would punish her for sleeping with another man, so her life would be at risk, and unlike David, she cannot ensure her own safety.[110]

However, this does not mean that she sought the death of her husband, a point Sara Koenig made to counter John Calvin, according to whom Bathsheba's tears were nothing more than a show, a vile mockery, a product of her hypocrisy regarding Uriah's death.[111]

On the contrary, Richard Davidson affirmed that Bathsheba does not carry out a habitual bereavement but that she laments with loud screams.

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[109] Ortiz, *Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano*, 161.

[110] Sara Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 16.

[111] Koenig, *Bathsheba Survives*, 18.

The narrator uses a strong verb to describe her lamentation.[112] Still, such a view treats her as an accomplice, hypocritical and lustful.

This is something that cannot be seen clearly since "by hiding from the reader Bathsheba's reactions to the king's sexual demands, the narrator has eliminated a direct route of sympathy between the reader and the female character."[113] Is it so difficult to sympathise with a character without a voice, to sympathise with someone who does not complain, who does not act, and who accepts every oppression that can be done to her? Despite her silencing, the narrative shows a Bathsheba who ends up being a survivor, one who proves that she, too, can play a role as the Queen Mother.

5. Implications of Both Stories in Matthew's Genealogy after Analysis

The re-reading of both stories goes beyond the traditional reading that considers the two women simple and sinful. It helps us understand the oppression under which they lived, highlighting that not only did they pave the way for Mary's appearance but that their stories are just as complicated and relevant as Mary's.

5.1 Implications for the Biblical Context

The context in which the genealogy of Jesus was written dealt with the tension between Judeo-Christianity and the more orthodox Judaism that was flourishing at the time. According to Pablo Richard, in its early years, the Jesus movement was able to coexist with Jewish pluralism. However, after the crisis of 70 AD, since they had to face the Orthodox

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[112] Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology," 10.

[113] Alice Bach, "Sings of the flesh: Observations and Characterizations of the Bible," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 358.

and Rabbinic Judaism that presented itself as the only legitimate tradition, Matthew's community had to seek an alternative path and even suffer persecution.[114]

Despite this confrontation, Matthew's community tried to flourish, including Gentiles and women as an active part of the community. The community, though it clearly continued to live under the normative patriarchal structure of the time, also sought to be more inclusive than the Judaism of Jamnia.

According to Ivoni Richter, women were involved as paradigms of faith, linking service and house churches, and were part of the source of the complaints against those hierarchical patriarchal practices they sought to dominate. Thus, the presence of women in the genealogy served as an example for marginalised women, foreigners, prostitutes, adulteresses, and their welcome in the community.[115]

5.2. Contextualisation of their Stories and Implications for the Women in Ecuador Today

As Jacqueline Lapsley says, it is necessary to look with bifocal lenses to be aware of the reality of that time and its culture, and how different modern reality can be.[116] The current reality of women in Ecuador is related to gender inequality, violence, abuse, and objectification. According to the Panamerican Health Organisation, six out of 10 women aged 15 and over have suffered physical, sexual, psychological, and patrimonial assaults for the simple fact of being a woman.[117] In addition, the diversity of Ecuador means that the

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[114] Pablo Richard, "Evangelio de Mateo: Una visión Global y Liberadora," *Revista de Interpretación Biblica Latinoamericana* 27 (1997): 29.

[115] Ivoni Richter, "No Temáis…Id a Ver…Y Anunciad," *Revista de Interpretación Biblica Latinoamericana* 27 (1997): 145–148.

[116] Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, XIII.

[117] Panamerican Health Organization, "Comprender y abordar la violencia contra las mujeres," 100–102.

discrimination of one woman can be very different from the other – that is mestizo, indigenous, black women, and so on, face different kinds of discrimination.

The stories of these biblical women are similar to the women in the Ecuadorian context, where a woman is also valued for her body, her reproductive capacity, her physical attractiveness, for what she can offer to society in terms of her beauty and sexuality.

On the one hand, Bathsheba reflects the story of women who live under a male figure's abuse of power, who live in a position where they have been silenced, who are especially blamed as part of the problem of sexual abuse. On the other hand, Tamar reflects the social pressure of women to marry and have children as well as the conditioning to behave following social norms that can exist in sexist societies.

6. Conclusion

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 is positioned as unique due to the strange presence of women who disrupt the patrilineal system and the ideals conceived for the matriarchs of ancient Israel.

Many interpretations have treated these women as sinners and freeloaders. However, their stories reflect the oppression experienced by the women of their time in a patriarchal society, showing how these women were treated exclusively as a means of reproduction and pleasure and how their survival and access to land depended on this.

Tamar and Bathsheba have several things in common: their silence, their bodies being more valuable than their humanity, their survival despite the use and abuse of their bodies, and their experiences with finding themselves in extreme situations. Moreover, at the same time, they are capable of breaking the social system and escaping the system's oppression by taking radical measures. This does not want to affirm that the intention of the Gospel of Matthew in presenting them in the genealogical tree of Jesus is to emphasise sexual abuse as a common

point or as some type of solution. However, it does demonstrate the importance Matthew's community gave to women, and its search for an alternative to the traditional and orthodox rabbinical order of Jamnia in its attempt to combine the traditional with the renewal of society.

Regarding the stories' implications for the Ecuadorian context, Tamar and Bathsheba's appearance in the Messiah's genealogy motivates new re-readings that will help women inside and outside the church who endure similar situations, especially those women who live where women experience gender injustice daily. Tamar and Bathsheba's stories reflect the call of women to raise their voices against an oppressive system, to take risks and carve out a place in society for women.

Finally, this work opens the door for future research, especially more practical contextual readings from Ecuadorian women who have suffered sexual violence. Future research could focus on how these women understand these narratives. One could even apply these re-readings to the ecclesial context and see how sexual abuse is discussed in different denominations. The possibilities, in short, are numerous.

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9

A 'REALISTIC' WAY OF 'UNHIDING' WOMEN IN THE FAMILIAL PARABLES OF JESUS

Charel du Toit

1. Introduction

In the past, feminist biblical scholars, such as Schüssler Fiorenza[118] and Schottroff,[119] have drawn attention to the need for and importance of biblical scholarship to focus more on women in biblical texts and interpretation[120]. Often, feminist scholars are not taken seriously and

[118] Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 15.

[119] Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), xv.

[120] Social-scientific criticism has long been understood by many scholars to be an effective way to combat the threat of anachronism and ethnocentrism. It points out the differences and similarities of a person's own culture and those present in foreign writings (Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Rev. ed. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press,

have been ignored in mainstream biblical scholarship and historical Jesus-research[121]. Given this need for feminist biblical scholarship and women-focussed interpretations, I believe that social-scientific and historical Jesus scholarship – more specifically, a realistic reading of the parables – can be a valuable instrument in feminist studies of the New Testament.

2. A 'Realistic' Way of Reading Parables

Parables, in and of themselves, invite interpretations. Modern biblical features, such as headings before pericopes and parables,[122] provide readers with certain perspectives before they even start reading the parable itself. For example, in the parable of the Prodigal, the reader is prompted before even engaging with the first words to view the

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1993), 12; Pieter F. Craffert, "Jesus' Resurrection in a Social-Scientific Perspective: Is There Anything New to Be Said?," *Journal for the Study of Historical Jesus* 7 (2009): 130.). However, the researcher, in my case a white man, must not forget that they can never be removed from the research process and can thus introduce a possible, if not certain, bias. Context plays a crucial role in social-scientific research, as the researcher always has a stake or agenda in the research being done (John Hall Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?*, New Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 107–9; M. Daniel Carroll R., "Introduction: Issues of 'context' within Social Science Approaches to Biblical Studies" in *Rethinking Contexts, Rereading Texts: Contributions from the Social Sciences to Biblical Interpretation*, edited by M. Daniel Carrol R. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 200), 14–15.).

[121] Amy Madeleine Walters, "Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," *Open Theology* 6 (2020): 468.

[122] Bernard Brandon Scott suggests changing the headings of biblical pericopes and parables to merely be derived from the first words used in the Greek version of the text. In this way, the parable of the Prodigal Son becomes 'A man had two sons,' giving the parable a more holistic and familial title. See Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 4.

narrative in a certain way and with a certain outcome. In doing so, the other figures in the text become secondary.[123] The parables were not told, and written down, for modern audiences; rather, they were for the first-century rural audience of Jesus. Not acknowledging this dynamic can lead to possible ethnocentrism and anachronism, leading the reader to interpret the text as if it was written and directed towards their context and not to its ancient intended audience. This results in the reader applying their own cultural and personal understanding to the text, thereby ignoring the first-century context in which the text was authored. The reader and interpreter of the parable should first ask how the intended audience of Jesus, most likely from rural Galilee, would have interpreted the parables.[124]

Moreover, the social world of the first-century Mediterranean undoubtedly influenced Jesus' own values and

> his fundamental interests and loyalties were shaped within and orientated within the village. The interpretation of Jesus' parables must start with what is known typically about peasant values and expectations. Indeed, many of the parables themselves urge this starting point, assuming as they do knowledge of the Palestinian countryside under the early Roman Empire.[125]

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[123] Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 4; Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 30.

[124] John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus became Fiction about Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2012), 47; Ernest van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean: Stories of a Social Prophet* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 11.

[125] Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Peasants* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 172–73.

Jesus' audience also lived in, what anthropologist call, a high context society, which means that the knowledge shared in conversation, or in writing, with Jesus' audience in first-century Galilee would have been culturally and socially understood to contain certain details that most modern readers would not be aware of. Jesus' audience could 'fill in the gaps' and 'read in between the lines.' The author of the parable expects that the reader will be familiar with the social context to which the author refers.[126] This is an important distinction to understand, one that a 'realistic' reading helps to bring to the foreground.

It is key to focus on what a 'realistic' reading of the parables entails before looking at an example from the Prodigal. Van Eck[127] identifies two important pillars of a realistic reading of parables:

> Firstly, a realistic reading of the parables takes as point of departure that the parables are stories *drawn from nature or common life*, that is, stories to be read against the backdrop of the social realia (cultural scripts of sociocultural features) invoked by a given parable. From this perspective, the parables of Jesus are stories about shepherds attending flocks of sheep and not stories about Jesus looking for lost sinners (Lk 15:4–6), day labourers being hired to work in a vineyard and not God who invites gentiles to become part of his kingdom (Mt 20:1–15) and servants whose debts are released, and not God who forgives abundantly (Mt 18:23–33).[128]

[126] Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?*, 11.

[127] Ernest van Eck, "A Realistic Reading of the Parable of the Lost Coin in Q: Gaining or Losing Even More?," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 75 (2019): 1–2.

[128] Van Eck, "A Realistic Reading of the Parable of the Lost Coin in Q," 1–2.

Similarly, Kloppenborg[129] suggests that sometimes, within parables, 'a vineyard or a shepherd…is just a vineyard or a shepherd.'[130] Therefore, the parable's sociocultural background becomes critically important.

Second, a realistic reading of a parable focuses on the strangeness or vividness of certain details and how the first hearers of the parables would have interpreted or understood them, which is typical of high context societies.[131]

In interpreting the parables one should assume that the first audiences of Jesus' parables, most probably the peasantry in Galilee, already had cultural competence in these ancient practices, and had native (emic) knowledge of the social realia referred to in the parables.[132]

This also describes why the gospel authors do not explain the societal context in which the parables occur. Therefore, the parables of Jesus were not 'earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but earthly stories with heavy meanings.'[133]

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[129] John S. Kloppenborg, *Synoptic Problems: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 490.

[130] Scholars such as Wierzbicka (Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 302.), disagree with this view and do not see reading the parables in their first-century Mediterranean context as conflicting with reading them as stories concerning God and God's kingdom. For Wierzbicka, both are considered equally valid.

[131] Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?*, 11; Van Eck, "A Realistic Reading of the Parable of the Lost Coin in Q," 2.

[132] Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 20.

[133] William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 3.

3. The Prodigal Son as a Case Study

Van Eck suggests that 'social-scientific criticism in combination with realistic reading offer the relevant reading scenarios to interpret the social realia evoked by the narrative world of the parable.'[134] This way of reading can, for instance, draw attention to the role, or rather the absence, of women, specifically the mother, in the parable of the Prodigal, something that modern interpretations have seldom done. Jesus' familial parables would undoubtedly have meant something to Jesus' rural audience.[135] Within family structures, mothers often assumed the roles of reconcilers and mediators and stepped in on matters of conflict concerning marriage and inheritance rights. The son, who abandons his household, is also valuable to the mother, as he would be able to secure her place in the household.[136] In this way, when the

[134] Elliott, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 43.

[135] A realistic reading of parables also accepts that when Jesus refers to the kingdom of God, it is a realised and ethical eschatology, therefore not referring to heaven but to the earth itself, the here and now (or, rather, the then and there). Crossan (*The Power of Parable*, 120–24.) refers to three concepts that are present when Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God in parables: the kingdom is 'present (rather than imminent), collaborative (rather than interventionist), and nonviolent (rather than violent)' (Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 33.). In this way, the parables are about God's kingdom and not about God (theocentric) (Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 10.). As Van Eck (*The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 34.) puts it, 'Jesus had no doctrine of God, made no theological statements, and never used abstract language.' This means that 'the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is a father who subverts the patriarchal system of his day; the story tells how a father – who is part of the kingdom – should treat his Prodigal son; it is a story that pictures a totally new understanding of what family entails' (Van Eck, *The Parable of Jesus the Galilean*, 35.).

[136] The son had a critical role to play because, in his relationship with his father, and with his own wife, he becomes his mother's most important, and sometimes

parable was told, the rural audience would have experienced both the father *and the mother* as being damaged, not just the father.[137]

Traditionally, this parable has been interpreted from the experience of the father or the two sons; however, the house to which the son returns, as well as the feast that is thrown after his return, would be a space occupied and, to some extent, governed by women. Furthermore, a mother's presence is implied in the very first verse of the parable, Luke 15:11 (ESV): '…there was a man who had two sons.' Giving birth[138] to a son was an important event for a woman: by producing a male descendant, she would, after her marriage to her husband, be welcomed into the household from the periphery and be accepted as a member of the family. Houses were also spaces where women had some sense of authority or power and could exercise a certain amount of

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her only, defender and ally. It is because of this dynamic that the most important relationship a wife can have is with her son (Malina, *The New Testament World*, 128.).

[137] Richard L. "Rohrbaugh, A Dysfunctional Family and its Neighbors," in *Jesus and His Parables*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 141–52.

[138] Mortality rates were extremely high among women in the first century. Women often died in child birth, and few lived past the age of 35. Because of this high death rate, the population barely replenished itself. It was thus unlikely for a widowed or divorced woman to remain unmarried. Remarriage was also expected in Roman society. Therefore, the mother could have possibly died in childbirth; however, the father would most likely have remarried, and a woman, assuming the role of a mother, would still have occupied the house (John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), 84; Susan Treggiari, "Marriage and Family in Roman Society," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 175; William R. G. Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 2012), 102.).

influence.[139] In both Luke 15:20 (the son returning to his household) and Luke 15:25 (the feast that is thrown), the narrative is directed towards

[139] A woman's primary domain in the Jewish and Roman world was the household. As such, it was also her primary sphere of influence, with some sources proposing that a women had even more influence than a man in the household. The household was thus also the domain of a woman's leadership. This was no different in the emerging Jesus movement. Although texts such as Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:22–24, and 1 Peter 3:1–6 portray the ideal women as being modest and submissive, women had much more autonomy and agency, even managing the estate and slaves in bigger, more successful households. It was not strange for widows to not remarry and continue to run the estate by themselves. In fact, this phenomenon gained even more popularity seeing that the early Jesus movement promoted the idea of a woman remaining unmarried after a divorce or becoming a widow. Even in poorer families, women could be seen working alongside their husbands, slaves, and children (Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 1987), 58; Carolyn Osiek, "Women in House Churches," in *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed. Graydon F Snyder, Julian Victor Hills, and Richard B. Gardner (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 300; David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 2002), 5–6; Richard Saller, "Women, Slaves, and the Economy of the Roman Household," in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, eds. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 2003), 190; Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 64; Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 12; William R. G. Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 2013), 32–33; Carolyn Osiek, "Leadership Roles and Early Christian Communities" in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Benjamin H. Dunning (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 508; Erin Vearncombe, "Kinship," in *The Ancient Mediterranean Social World: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Zeba A. Cook (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 2020), 50–51.).

the house and, as such, the physical space and location of women. Women would also often manage the estate, which would include the planning and implementation of feasts, such as the one thrown in celebration of the returning son. Rohrbaugh,[140] when referring to Josephus (*Ant*. 15.7.29), also mentions that women would often play an active role in issues of inheritance and the reconciliation of family members.[141]

It can thus be proposed that the father most likely spent time with his wife in the house during the absence of his son and that the wife played an active role in the father's change of heart, which might have happened before he was 'filled with compassion' in Luke 15:20. This prompts the father to act in an extremely dishonourable and even dangerous way when approaching his son.[142] In using a 'realistic'

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[140] "A Dysfunctional Family and its Neighbors," 147.

[141] Josephus (*Ant*. 15.7.29) also extensively mentions the power of certain women over their husbands. When recounting the role of women in the court of Herod the great, he notes that 'when the women, by kind words, and liberal presents, had gained his affections over to them, he was by degrees overcome' and 'though Herod should have all the success he could wish for, and should return again, he could not contradict his wife, in what she desired.'

[142] The behaviour of the father, when he runs to meet his son, would have caused him to lose his dignity in the first-century Mediterranean society. Because they were remote figures of power, it would be considered a shock and dishonourable behaviour to run, unless it was in the case of emergency. Moreover, the father might have had to lift up his robes and expose his legs to run to his son. In addition to being a dishonourable and shameful act, it would have been judged harshly by his community. Moreover, his social standing would be affected and perhaps even compromised.(Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 70, 75; Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 78; Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 142; Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 2008), 126; David G. Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 203.). Therefore, the father in the parable subverts the patriarchal system of his

reading of the parable, not only does the role of the mother, and even the women's roles during the feast, come to the foreground, but also the effect that they most likely had on the father and the returning son.[143] In effect, the Prodigal Son does not return to his father's arms but to the arms that *his mother* has prepared for him. In this way, a realistic reading of the parables can bring certain details and voices to light that might not have been 'seen' or 'heard' in traditional readings.

4. Conclusion

The early Jesus movement and the teachings of Jesus provided a space for equality and safety for marginalised groups, including women.[144] However, the problem persists that women are still not read

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day by not acting the way that was expected in his time. In this way, Jesus envisions a totally new idea of a family (Van Eck, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean*, 35.).

[143] Kenneth Ewing Bailey (*Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 1976), 181.) notes that the father most likely expected his son to fail and be either dead or living the life of a beggar.

[144] Women play important roles as anointers, outsiders, and followers of Jesus in many gospel narratives and in the traditions of the gospel authors. The woman anointing Jesus' feet in Mark 14:3–9, Matthew 26:6–13, John 12:1–8, and Luke 7:36–50, probably a prostitute, would have been breaking purity laws and entering a space she would not have been welcome in. By allowing her to wash his feet, Jesus is also taking the impurity of the woman upon himself. In this way, he becomes guilty by association (Kathleen E. Corley, *Women & the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2002), 90; Scott F. Spencer, *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth: The Women in Jesus' Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 113; Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 344.). In all the gospel accounts, Jesus does not behave as a typical male would in the first-century Mediterranean world. He commands the critics to leave the woman alone. He does not turn the woman away, even at the behest of the men who surrounds him (Loader, *The*

as present in texts where the first hearers and intended audience would have understood women to be present.

A realistic reading of the parables, I believe, can provide a way of 'hearing' the voices and presence of women who have been 'buried' and 'hidden' by the authors of the texts, thereby, 'exhuming' or 'unhiding' the valuable roles women played in the time of Jesus.

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New Testament on Sexuality, 346.). Jesus also breaks the norms of his time by associating with outsiders, including women, by not approaching a woman on the grounds of her sexual behaviour. A prime example is found in the genealogy of Matthew (Mt 1:1–17) that not only includes women – an extremely strange feature for the time – but also women who would have been considered doubtful in character because of their sexual exploits or foreigner status. Women who were outsiders could threaten the security of the gens and clan (Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publication Company, 2002), 17–28.). The inclusion of women in the genealogy is most probably a tradition that originated with Jesus himself. Therefore, in Jesus' view, 'the women's sexuality is not a basis for discrimination against them or against having a sacred place in the divine ordering of human history' (Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, 350.).

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10

A POSTCOLONIAL REREADING OF FIRST TIMOTHY 2:12 FOR GENDER JUSTICE IN EVANGELICAL CHURCH WINNING ALL (ECWA)

Moses Iliya Ogidis

1. Introduction

The letter of 1 Timothy has received scholarly attention due to the gender issues provoked by it, leading to several theological debates, especially concerning the inclusion of women in the ordained ministry of some traditions and the reasons for their exclusion from other churches or denominations. In Africa, especially Nigeria, where this paper is contextualised, the debate on women's inclusion in church practices is not new. However, the fact that most of the scriptural interpretations have interpreted women as subjects to the leadership of men and found them worthy of exclusion from the ordained ministry in African countries like Nigeria has never been challenged. In the history of the growth of the church, since time immemorial, there have been such disparities between men and women. Based on 1 Timothy 2:12, that women are not to be ordained is enshrined in the constitution of several Nigerian churches. For instance, according to the Bye-Law and the Minister's Handbook of Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA),

"it is the policy of ECWA not to licence or ordain women in conformity with 1 Timothy 2:12."[145]

In light of this, how can postcolonial interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:12 address the exclusion of women from being ordained in ECWA churches? This paper discusses the background of ECWA as a denomination, briefly describes the letter of 1 Timothy, discusses the influence of early missionaries on the interpretation of the Bible, and conducts a postcolonial interpretation of the text.

The ECWA was formerly known as the Association of Evangelical Churches of West Africa from when they registered with the government in 1954. It was later known as the Evangelical Church of West Africa, and then, in 2013, it got its current name, Evangelical Church Winning All, based on the idea that ECWA will concentrate on global evangelism by expanding its focus beyond West Africa. One of the fastest-growing Christian denominations in Nigeria, with over 10 million members worldwide, ECWA, according to its own understanding, was founded through the agency of the Holy Spirit who moved three young men – Walter Gowans, Thomas Kent, and Rowland Bingham – via the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). Walter's mother, believing the mission to be God's will for her children, plays a major role in their coming to the African continent, specifically Nigeria.[146] ECWA's goal, as stated in the Minister's Handbook, is to glorify God[147], but it takes a conservative stance in its teachings and doctrines and does not include women in its ordained ministry. Since this gender injustice is based on a colonial, patriarchal, and culturally prejudiced

[145] ECWA Bye-Laws, 2019, 43; Ministers Handbook, 2002, 33

[146] Mipo E. Dadang, "Enduring Legacy: A Trail of Doctrinal Uniqueness and Unity of the Evangelical Church Winning ALL (ECWA)," *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)* 7, no. 10 (October 2020): 16–27. ISSN 2349-0373 (Print) & ISSN 2349-0381 (Online). https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0710002 www.arcjournals.org (page 17).

[147] *ECWA Minister's Handbook* (Jos, Nigeria: ECWA Headquarters. 2002), iv.

interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, a postcolonial interpretation of the biblical text is necessary.

2. Method

This paper uses postcolonial biblical criticism, which, in the words of Segovia, is an

> ideological reflection on the discourse and practice of imperialism and colonialism from the vantage point of a situation where imperialism and colonialism have come by and large but by no means altogether so - to a formal end but remain very much at work in practice, as neo-imperialism and neocolonialism.[148]

Postcolonial biblical criticism is useful for this paper as it helps to focus on ECWA's exclusionary interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12. It incorporates other theories that can bring out marginalised voices in texts, thus helping us to articulate the desire of the subjugated, marginalised, and subordinated people (women in ECWA) regarding their sense(s) of identity and self-determination. Such a hermeneutical discourse, one that also does not neglect the aspects of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, poses a counter-offensive against ECWA's biblical interpretation that denies the divine call some women in ECWA churches have experienced,[149] thus opening up possibilities for them to serve in ECWA's ordained ministry.

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[148] Fernando. F. Segovia, "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Optic," in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 51.

[149] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible.* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000).

Moreover, since ECWA as a denomination strives to overcome its heritage of colonial Christianity, it might also be interested in overcoming the shades of colonialism that exist in its interpretation and have men and women as partners in its ordained ministry.

3. Timothy at First Glance

The letter of 1 Timothy, when read from a postcolonial lens, offers a different view than that offered from an evangelical perspective. For instance, in 1 Timothy 1:1, the author affirms the existence of another Empire, one different from the Roman Empire, which he presents to be God's Empire. As Jeremy Punt argues, "the ideological glue that kept Roman imperial theology together, imperial theology, would have had a fourfold basis of power, like the rest of Roman civilisation, mythology and religion. Whilst Roman civilisation was founded on imperial theology and it in turn centred on the divinity of the Emperor, it involved more than 'the emperor cult.'"[150] The author of 1 Timothy goes on to show God's hegemonic power in 1 Timothy 1:1, stating that Jesus is their saviour, the one in whom their hope should rest. This contradicts the ideology of the Roman Empire, according to which the emperor is the saviour of the people, the one in whom they should place their hope. This is why Ralph Broadbent observed that

> the key texts on the empire and those in authority are 1 Timothy 2.1-2 and Tit. 3.1 (and to a lesser extent 1 Tim. 6.15). Those who rule the empire are to be obeyed, and prayers are to be offered for them.[151]

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[150] Jeremy Punt, "Empire and New Testament Texts: Theorising the Imperial, in Subversion and Attraction," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012): 3; Art. #1182, 11 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i1.1182

[151] Ralph Broadbent. "The First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus," in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed

That is why the author uses the Greek word ἀνθρώπων even though some commentators and scholars have translated it to mean humanity. The following verse 2 shows what the author is referring to: βασιλέων, those in power and exercise authority over people. When discussing the beginning of chapter 2, most commentators have made the ideological opinion that these rulers, empires, or governments, no matter how tyrannical, are appointed by God. To disobey them or rebel against them is to go against God's will.[152] One can thus see how the author, when he notes the need for prayers for kings but is silent about the queens, also supports the hegemonic power of the men (more specifically, the emperor) of his time. The emperors, who are considered authoritarian, forcefully impose their authority on citizens. Elna Mouton observes how the author also portrays God as an authoritarian king and compared it to a transformed household where the authority of the pater familias is not coarse but life-enhancing.[153] Similarly, according to Christopher Hutson, the author's encouragement to "pray for kings and all who are in authority" (1 Timothy 2:2) reflects a classic Jewish tactic for survival under pagan domination, a way to demonstrate loyalty without compromising their commitment to monotheism. Early Christians adopted this tactic for the same reasons as the Jews: to negotiate their position within the Empire but not to surrender themselves. Furthermore, Hutson noted that a poetic, creedal statement grounds this call to pray not only in Jewish monotheism but also in Christological reflection (1 Timothy 2:5-6). These prayers aim to deflect suspicion, since the early Christian group was little known and was likely to draw criticism from the neighbours (3:7; 5:14; 6:1; cf. Titus 1:9; 2:5, 8).

Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah. (York Road, London: T & T Clark, 2009), 324.

[152] Ralph Broadbent, "The First and Second Letters," 324.

[153] Elna Mouton, "New Life from a Pastoral text of Terror? Gender Perspectives on God and Humanity in 1 Timothy 2," *Scriptura III* 3 (2012): 584.

Furthermore, the Christ movement lacked legal status and was likely to draw suspicion from governing officials (2 Tim 2:9; 3:11; 4:16).[154]

The author's hybrid identity influenced his writing of the letter. While trying to negotiate the position of the early Christians, the Empire ends up affirming rules in a Christianised way. The author is a Jew in the Roman Empire and the Graeco-Roman culture and a follower of Christ. He was greatly influenced by the culture of his time, a time when the elite men in the Roman Empire considered it the norm to marginalise, subordinate and oppress women. In the biblical era, as Leitch and Leitch noted, the society was very much patriarchal, and women's status was subservient to the male head-of-household. If a woman were to take up a leadership role, it would have been considered scandalous and an affront to the sanctity of worship. However, during the first century, there were women who did take up leadership roles in worship. Not only were women prohibited from taking any role that would appear to be dominant over men but they were also urged to dress modestly (1 Timothy 2:9-10).[155] Such prohibitions and notions tend to uphold the hegemonic power of elite men, who are the decision-makers at home and in society.

4. The Roles of Early Missionaries and Patriarchy within ECWA

When discussing the interpretation and translation of the Bible in Nigeria, one cannot underestimate the influence of western missionaries, who brought with them their Eurocentric interpretations and ideologies,

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[154] Christopher R. Hutson. "Saved through Childbearing: The Jewish Context of 1 Timothy 2:15," *Novum Testamentum* 56 (2014): 392–410.

[155] Cliff Leitch and Helen Leitch, "Christian Bible reference: What does the Bible say about women in ministry?" Christian Bible Reference Site, accessed September 27, 2021, http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq_women.htm.

which helped sustain Nigeria's patriarchal culture. The majority of Christians in Nigeria, mainly evangelicals, thus base their understanding of Christianity and the church on a Eurocentric, patriarchal interpretation of the Bible. "[T]his kind of patriarchal-colonial Christianity and theology," Njoroge argues, "left African adherents disempowered and disoriented; cultural imperialism was central in the process of Christianizing and civilizing the Africans."[156] Nigerians thus cannot shy away from the impact of colonialism and the roles some western missionaries had in colonising the Christian message with their imperial ideology of racism and the superiority of their culture to that of the Nigerians, whom they called "demonic, barbaric, heathen, pagan," and so on. Harvey Sindima agrees with Njoroge that

> missionaries also brought other baggage with them; they identified Christianity with their culture, values, and history. The result of such uncritical appropriation of cultural views made Christianity an ideology of western civilization. As an ideology, Christianity was arrogant and quickly destroyed everything and everyone in its ways.[157]

Such a vision of Christianity as an ideological construct in Nigeria agrees with what Mercy Oduyoye said: "African Christian theologians take the traditional reformation view that the central source of theology is the Bible."[158] While the reformers' interpretations are more focused on the literal and spiritual sense of the meaning of each biblical text, the evangelicals are more focused on interpretations of the scripture based

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[156] Nyambura J. Njoroge, "The Bible and African Christianity: A Curse or a Blessing?" In *Other Ways of Reading African Women and the Bible*, ed Musa Dube (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publication, 2001), 211.

[157] Harvey J. Sindima. *Drums of Redemption: An Introduction to African Christianity.* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 117.

[158] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 37.

on their context and culture. The evangelical ideological belief of headship informs its perspective not only on gender but also on church and home leadership. A key ideology the evangelicals have adopted to exemplify the principles of "tradition" and "morality" can be found in the "traditional family model."[159] ECWA's belief and use of this model, one where the men are breadwinners and the women domestic workers, has led to it being internalised by the majority of households associated with ECWA.

Furthermore, women are the majority in the ECWA. In every Sunday worship or church programme, they come out in mass numbers more than men. Though they are instrumental in supporting the ordained ministers, their role is restricted to the women fellowship, which includes singing, offering hospitality, offering prayers, cleaning the church, teaching the Sunday school, cooking for the elders and pastors during church functions, and other domestic work. Moreover, according to the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 by the ECWA women fellowship international Bible study book 3, "the woman are not to aspire to be pastors because that goes contrary to the teaching of the Bible but they can be supporters of the mission, the woman as an evangelist but not to think of being a pastor, the woman as an intercessor and the woman as a teacher."[160] Most of the interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:12 the ECWA and their congregations adhere to are centred on patriarchy, which, as the author of 1 Timothy states in verse 13-15, also interprets the passage using the fall in Genesis.

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[159] Christopher Bishop, "Exploring Gender Roles and Gender Equality within the Evangelical Church," PhD diss., (Chapman University, 2019), 34–39. https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000037.

[160] *ECWA Women Fellowship International Bible Study Book 3* (Jos, Nigeria: ECWA Christian Education Department, ECWA Headquarters), 68.

5. Reasons for Women's Exclusion from Ordained Ministry

The first reason appears to be based on the doctrinal and patriarchal interpretation of the Bible by ECWA, an interpretation that is used to exclude women from ordained ministry. Moreover, the church's doctrine appears to find support from this patriarchal interpretation, which was influenced by the early missionaries, an interpretation that tends to value men as superior and women as inferior. Such an interpretation, according to Nyambura, robs women of their dignity, hope, self-worth, and God-given creativity and calling.[161] Women have also been excluded by the way the Bible has been read, heard, perceived, and interpreted. Most women in ECWA are being socialised to accept their exclusion because the Bible says so.

Another reason used to justify the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry is culture. Cultural norms and values, Musimbi Kanyoro argues, have divided and silenced women in the African society.[162] These norms and values have the power to shape human beings by influencing their everyday conducts, among which are the important decisions people make concerning gender issues. Just as Judy Mbugua claims that the Bible has often been sacrificed at the altar of cultures, "women are allowed to take the same courses with men in Bible colleges, seminaries, and most of their teachers are women, but they are not ordained at the end. Most churches have used and twisted Biblical doctrines against women's inclusion as ordained ministers."[163]

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[161] Nyambura, "The Bible and African Christianity," 214.

[162] Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube. (Geneva: WCC Publication, 2001), 104.

[163] Judy Mbugua, E. Leevathi Manasse, Nora Matilda Mendez de Mora, and Russell Palsrok, "How Culture Affects the Roles of Women and Men in Ministry," in *Empowering Women and Men to use their Gifts Together in*

Such women who end up in the seminaries of ECWA are busy preparing men for the ordained ministry, and most of them exert authority over the men in the class. That is why a postcolonial approach to the text and to ECWA's interpretation of it aims to expose the injustices prevalent in the church, the injustices that stem from prejudiced cultural norms and values and the biased interpretation of the Bible concerning the relationship between men and women in ordained ministry.

6. Postcolonial Reading of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and Gender Justice in ECWA

Nigerian Christianity has suffered from interpreting the Bible through a colonial, patriarchal, and culturally prejudiced lens. Concerning the roles of women in the church and society, Nigerian Christianity needs to liberate itself and leave behind such exclusionary interpretations of the Bible. When rereading 1 Timothy 2:11-12 using the lens of postcolonial biblical criticism in the context of gender justice, it is important to note what Bill Ashcroft stated as key for such a rereading: the transformation of both the oppressed and the oppressors using the same Bible that has been used to cause oppression. The aim is to not only conduct a postcolonial Biblical interpretation but also transform the text to empower the oppressed.[164] The greatest humanistic and historical task of the oppressed is to transform and liberate not only the oppressed but also their oppressors.

Before dealing with the main verse, which is the focus of this paper, verse 11 of 1 Timothy 2 must be discussed; in particular, the verse's Greek verb μανθανέτω, which, according to Wallace Daniel, can be translated as either a command (a woman must learn in quietness and in

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Advancing the Gospel, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Thailand: Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 53. 2004), 69.

[164] Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation.* (London, New York: Published by Routledge, 2001), 5.

full submission) or a request (let a woman learn in quietness and in full submission).[165] Whichever way the verb is translated, it does not change the heart of its meaning. When translated as a command, the author is telling Timothy that women must learn, because it is possible that women do not have the kind of education men have in the Roman Empire. This instruction also applies to men. When translated as a request, the author is requesting that Timothy start allowing the unlearned women to commence learning. The imperative force, according to Marshall and Towner, is to be found not so much in the "learning" but in the manner in which the women learn – in "quietness and full submission."[166]

Even though 1 Timothy 2:12 appears to deny women from being ordained, it needs to be interpreted according to the purpose of the letter as a whole and not the verse alone. Interpreting the verse in isolation does not do justice to the entire chapter and the purpose of the letter. The 1 Timothy chapter 2 focuses on the correction of improper conduct in the Christian church in Ephesus where Timothy is the pastor. In this chapter, the author focuses on the issues that cause division in the movement and help young Timothy address the situation.

Witherington avers that 1 Timothy 2:11 tells women what they must do (learn), while 1 Timothy 2:12 states what they must not do at that time (teach): "The verb here, ἐπιτρέπω, is present, continual tense. Paul does not say, 'I will not/never permit,' but rather, 'I am not permitting.'"[167] This shows more resistance to the traditional and literal interpretation, which tends to completely silence women, which appears not to be the case in this context. When it comes to interpreting the

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[165] Daniel B. Wallace. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 486–88.

[166] I Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1999), 453.

[167] Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 226.

Greek verb (in 1 Timothy 2:12) ἐπιτρέπω (permit or allow) as temporal or universal, scholars are divided. The verb ἐπιτρέπω – which can also mean to turn to, to give up to, to commit to one's care, to entrust to, to trust to, to give way to, to suffer, to permit, to refer to, to concede, to agree to, or even to command[168] – is a present active indicative verb. The indicative carries less universal force than an imperative, which is more of a command, as stated by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider.[169] Therefore, interpreting it with its less universal force, the verb needs to be understood as an instruction, one that demands Timothy's immediate action in the church in Ephesus and not, as the literal and spiritual interpreters argue, from generation to generation.

Stanley Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo further argued that if Paul had used an imperative – which would be rendered as "Do not allow a woman to teach" – it would be easier to understand Paul's prohibition as being permanent. Instead, the present indicative indicates that "Paul is not voicing a timeless command, but a temporary directive applicable to a specific situation: 'I am not allowing.'"[170] Moreover, the phrase οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω now appears more clearly to constitute a practical and contingent ruling that conforms with its use in the New Testament. Apart from its occurrence in 1 Timothy 2:12 and in 1 Corinthians 14:34, the sense in which the phrase is consistently used is that of giving someone leave or permission to do something.[171] There are places in the New Testament where writers make use of the word ἐπιτρέπω – for

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[168] Madeleine Goh and Chad Schroeder, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 799.

[169] Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 1* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 43.

[170]Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 130.

[171] Andrew C. Perriman, "What Eve did, What Women Shouldn't Do: The Meaning of Auqentew in 1 Timothy 2:12," *Tyndale Bullentine* 44, no. 1 (1993): 130.

instance, in the gospel of Mark 10:12, Jesus seems to prohibit (unilateral) divorce absolutely. In Matthew 19:8, an exception has been added, showing how tradition can change (which shows how ἐπιτρέπω can change). "Paul" now forbids something, but maybe later, he can change his mind, or the tradition can change, just like in Mark 10:12 and Matthew 19:8. The interpretation of the word is in every case related to a specific and limited set of circumstances. Authority is clearly located in an individual, not in a body of absolute truth. It seems reasonable to argue, therefore, that the use of the verb ἐπιτρέπω can be interpreted as a progressive present, with the force of "I am not now permitting," or a genomic present, with the force of "I do not as a principle permit."[172]

Similarly, the Greek verb used in 1 Timothy 2:11 is μανθανέτω, derived from μανθάνω. It is a present active imperative third-person singular and means "to learn." Using this verb, the writer gives women an opportunity to acquire knowledge through instruction or receipts of information. Furthermore, Spencer notes that μανθανέτω (to learn) is the first imperative in the letter. The women were to learn mainly by studying, since the majority of the teachers during their time were men, with only a few women teachers. The word μανθανέτω could also refer to the acquisition of knowledge or skill through education.[173] However, according to the author, this is how they are to learn to understand what they are being taught: "in quietness" and "with full submission."[174]

Since several women are also among those fighting the inclusion of their fellow women in the church, there is a need to empower every woman in

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[172] Friedrich Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the NT and Other Christian Literature* (Chicago, 1961), 447 (7).

[173] Aida Besancon Spencer, *1 Timothy. New Covenant Commentary Series* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 58.

[174] Douglas J. Moo, "What does it Mean not to Teach or to Have Authority over Men (1 Timothy 2:11–15)," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, eds. J. Piper and W. Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991): 179-93.

ECWA and to deconstruct their belief about the inclusion of women in the ordained ministry. Many women are in ECWA seminaries, preparing men and women in the study of theology, but still, culture and patriarchal interpretation have denied their inclusion based on the misinterpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12. Similarly, as Oduyoye notes, African churches must empower women not only to speak for themselves but also to deconstruct patriarchal and cultural ways of interpreting the Bible, its theology, and make them receptive of the idea of men and women as partners in the ordained ministry. Only then will the church transform into a home for both men and women.[175] The journey towards deconstructing exclusionary ideologies should include men and women, as both need to leave behind patriarchal and culturally prejudiced modes of interpretation and arrive at modes that are holistic and inclusive. What is thus needed is a hermeneutics that is life-affirming and all-inclusive, not only within and outside the ECWA churches but also in Nigeria at large.

Conclusion

Both men and women must join and fight against the gender inequality prevalent in the church and society. This paper showed why it is enshrined in ECWA's constitution that women are not to be ordained based on 1 Timothy 2:12, an exclusion that stems from the doctrinal, patriarchal, and culturally prejudiced modes of interpreting the Bible – modes that exclude women and empowers men. The subordination and suppression of women in ECWA is also due to entrenched cultural norms and values, with most women accepting their roles as being inferior and undermining the notion that God can call both men and women to the ordained ministry. This paper calls for the deconstruction of patriarchal interpretations of the Bible and the rethinking of ECWA's

[175] Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anawa*, 181.

belief in being a more inclusive and liberating church to all genders. This paper's postcolonial rereading fulfils what is stated in ECWA's constitution – that ECWA's aim is to glorify God. To glorify God, this paper calls for the inclusion of women and for their empowerment, so that they can speak and stand for themselves within and outside the church. This paper acknowledges that human beings construct culture, that the cultural practices in the Bible and Nigeria should not be confused with God's will, and that the cultural practices that do not facilitate the inclusion of women in ordained ministry should be deconstructed.

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11

FIESTA

Hans de Wit

She recently received her doctorate from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), at the Faculty of Religion and Theology. The defence could be followed from a Zoom-distance. After the defence, there is such a moment that the candidate is put on hold. It took a long time. She sat there, alone in her room in Buenos Aires. She was awarded cum laude. In the preface of her dissertation, she mentions her stay at the VU.

This Argentinian theologian, I suspect, holds the Bridging Gaps record of having 18 years between her participation in the programme and the full maturity of the fruits of her participation. Her year of participation was 2003, and that year's group consisted of eight students: Argentina, Colombia, South Africa, India (2), Indonesia, the Czech Republic, and Croatia. In 2003, her research was on 'Modern and postmodern conceptions of subjectivity,' and, in 2021, her dissertation was on 'How to think theology in postmodern times within a given tradition.'

A few weeks after her defence, I found a few photos of her stay in the Netherlands. I sent them to her with the words *pura nostalgia*. She

answered me, slightly admonishingly: 'a little nostalgia is good, but, if you allow me, I would feel a great joy (*una gran alegría*) in your place.'

She was right, of course. A little melancholy, but also joy, wonder, awe, and gratitude. The fact that, over the course of all these Bridging Gaps years, a family has grown to include more than 200 friends in more than 40 countries is something that provokes wonder and awe. The gratitude has to do with my own path through life and theology, and also with what the programme has meant for its participants.

For the formation of that extended family, I see three moments as fundamental. If I have to define them hermeneutically, I would say: (1) learn to respect the rights of the (biblical) text; (2) learn to respect the context and role of the reader; and (3) learn to respect the context and role of the other reader.

1. The First Moment

It is the 1990s. The faculty is busy, the rights of the texts are fully respected, and the students are thoroughly educated. That is the first moment, the first moment of respect for the rights of the (old) texts.

2. The Second Moment

But it is the 1990s. This leads to the second moment, the moment of contextuality. At the faculty, a course on liberation theology has been introduced, and the genitive theologies and hermeneutics elsewhere in the world make VU students curious. Latin American theologians offer their theological reflection as a message for the First World. Third-world theologies raise questions that seem to be pushed aside in Western theology, which is primarily in conversation with the non-believer. The VU students become restless: they want to leave and listen to these new voices! Respect for the rights of the text is no longer sufficient for good

theologising, they think. Theology and Bible reading must be contextual.

By dozens, they swarm out to Nicaragua, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Argentina, Chile, South Africa, India, the Czech Republic, and Indonesia. The effect of the study period abroad is enormous. "It's all about the experiences that I could never have had in the Netherlands,' said one of the students. For many, it is the first time that they come into contact with contexts where suffering and premature death are never rationed. Many begin to think differently about the right way to study theology: 'By distancing myself from my own context and encountering another, I learned to determine my own place within theology;' 'My image of everything I took for granted was completely adjusted;' 'I have started to see many things differently, my perspective has broadened.'

The most moving thing they found was poverty: 'The confrontation with poverty, and the ways people find to live in such conditions, really moved me:' 'What touched me the most is the confrontation with poverty, looking into the eyes of children who live in hovels and hardly have anything to eat;' 'That death is much more threatening and close by in South Africa.'

3. The Third Moment

It is these students who, with their experiences, herald the third and decisive moment in the formation of the Bridging Gaps family. 'It would be good,' said one of the VU students who returned from Nicaragua, 'if there were (financial and practical) opportunities to actually engage in exchange. That people from far away could also study here.'

The third step is thus taken, that of the inter- and multicultural encounter. The step that gives the opportunity, in the encounter with the other, to relativise the weight of one's own context and to thus avoid the pitfall and temptation of contextual reading of the Bible to want to arrive

at a new rulership. After all, the contextual reading of biblical texts fights with the prevailing and dominant reading traditions, wanting to break away from readings that exclude and consider themselves as the objective, ultimate reading. Such breaking away, sometimes, cannot happen without entering into a new fight, whereby perspective is often lost again.

Hermeneutically speaking, one of the special aspects of the Bridging Gaps event is that by encountering many contextual readings, a hermeneutics of hospitality, of dependency is practiced. There in that encounter with a multitude of contexts, what Edward Said once called contrapuntal reading can be practiced:

> The experiences of the exploited and the exploiter being studied together. In other words, texts from metropolitan centers and peripheries are studied simultaneously. Contrapuntal reading paves the way for a situation which goes beyond reified binary characterizations of Eastern and Western writings. To read contrapuntally means to be aware simultaneously of mainstream scholarship and of other scholarship which the dominant discourse tries to domesticate and speaks and acts against.[176]

4. Mirror

My own path through theology is reflected in the creation of and the journey with that large Bridging Gaps family. Trained at the VU, specialising in biblical studies: many languages, much history, the rights of the text. Then, in the 1980s, long years of contextual Bible reading in Chile, in times when the boss of that country was dictator Pinochet, *and* the transforming encounter with the Latin American Bible movement and liberation hermeneutics. Finally, back in the Netherlands, the

[176] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 59.

importance of reciprocity, of the intercultural, the weight of the other context and the reading, not only of one's own Bible but also that of the other and others.

5. Transformation

As with the VU students who travelled abroad, for the Bridging Gaps students, theologising in a different context has had an enormous impact. A key word in their evaluations is transformation. When I read back on their experiences, the Argentinian colleague is absolutely right: the right word is not nostalgia but, instead, wonder, gratitude, joy.

Those are also the words Bridging Gaps students use to describe their experience: 'It is a great joy for me to be a part of this Bridging Gaps programme because we could learn about other's faiths, cultures and contexts,' wrote a student from Myanmar. 'It really broadens my thoughts and worldviews in my theological journey,' wrote another student from Myanmar. A student from Croatia said: 'I have had the most wonderful combination of intensive and effective individual research, stimulating class discussions, unforgettable church visits, and an amazingly enjoyable fellowship and friendship with my colleagues from the Bridging Gaps group.' 'It was,' a student from Rwanda said, 'very empowering. Contextual analysis reinforced an unpronounced feeling that has been in me that our contexts are very much relevant to make sense of the Scripture.' 'This class,' one of the many students from India said, 'also enables us to see how different people from various contexts and backgrounds interpret the Bible and make it relevant for one's own situation.'

6. Relevance

Making theology and Bible reading relevant to one's own situation ─ the contextual element ─ has been the intention in almost all research

proposals. 'South African post-apartheid church: Liminal or not?' a South African student wonders. A Cuban student wants to research Protestantism on the island: 'Unity and diversity of Cuban Protestantism.' What should we understand by 'the chosen people in the context of multiculturalism in Indonesia' is the question an Indonesian student poses. 'How the local community in Boquisso reads the Bible in the context of post-conflict in Mozambique' is what a student from Mozambique wants to explore.

7. New Record?

We noted at the beginning of this contribution that the Argentine theologian holds the Bridging Gaps record of having 18 years between her participation in the programme (2003) and the full maturity of the fruits of her participation (2021). However, her record may still be threatened by the Indonesian student who participated in 2004 and is now pursuing her PhD at the VU on the same subject. What is special about her research proposal is that she wants to address the danger of contextual Bible reading under the title 'The danger of the contextual reading of Ambonese Christians of Joshua 8.' The story of Joshua 8 is about the destruction of Ai, and the student notes that '[a] contextual reading takes the people of Ambon into a violent attitude towards the Muslim people at Ambon, because they identify the Muslims with the enemies of Israel, and they identify themselves with Israel.'

8. Listening with Your Soul

If one were to ask what I see as the most essential characteristic, the most essential challenge of the Bridging Gaps event, then I would come to what Levinas once called 'the second listening.' The ability to listen again to your biblical texts, your tradition, and your context through the encounter with the other. I see the Bridging Gaps

programme mainly as an exercise in learning to listen to each other, not exotically or as tourists, but with your soul.

I borrow this expression from an impressive story I found in one of Martin Buber's books. Buber uses this experience to describe his own change of perspective and, indeed, his own moment of transformation. The story reveals the core of what Bridging Gaps is and should be: practicing the ability to listen to the other with your soul. Buber says:

> The only thing that happened was that one morning, after a morning of religious ecstasy, I received an unknown young man 'without being there with my soul.' It was not that I did not approach him kindly, I did not treat him differently from all his peers who used to consult me at this time of day, like an oracle. I talked with him attentively and frankly, but I failed to guess the questions which he did not ask. Later, one of his friends – he was no longer alive – told me the substance of these questions, that he had come to me not in passing, but as if guided by fate, not to talk, but to ask a decision of me at this very moment. What do we expect when we despair and still go to a person? A presence that tells us that he is still there, the sense.[177]

What do we expect when we despair and still go to someone? We expect presence, the presence of someone who can listen with their soul! Someone who can guess the questions the other person does not ask. Someone who can build bridges between what is broken.

9. Fiesta

After the nostalgia letter, the recently graduated Bridging Gaps theologian from Argentina wrote me a final letter. She needed to travel

[177] Martin Buber, *Das Dialogische Prinzip* (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider Verlag, 1992), 158

to Amsterdam soon to collect her degree, and 'I hope we can meet in the not-so-distant future. I have to travel to Amsterdam and get my degree and, of course, have a party (*fiesta*) with my loved ones in the Netherlands.'

In sum, Bridging Gaps is not only the story of theological exchange, but also the celebration of new friendships, of embraces, of new sources of wisdom and experience, of discovering places of shared struggle. It is the celebration of meeting those who will become your 'loved ones.'

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PART II

A Catalyst for Community
Contextual Theology and Churches

12

BUILDING BRIDGES 2021

Mechteld Jansen

This publication, which was created in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Bridging Gaps programme, will hopefully find many readers building bridges across distances. May this publication allow us to be enriched by the multiple perspectives on the good life that is promised to us if we really want to live together.

Allow me to extend my sincere congratulations to all those who had the vision of starting the Bridging Gaps programme, a vision that, perhaps, dates far back. For some of the instigators of the programme, such as Em. Prof. Dr. Hans de Wit, based on their experiences in different parts of the world, shared their vision more than 40 years ago. It entailed the very core business of theology as an inter-contextual endeavour to discover the meaning and impact of biblical sources on justice and liberation. For doing theology, they realised, you not only need to discover but you also need to be dis-covered by the ears, the eyes, and the voices of others.

The Centre for Contextual Biblical Interpretation, of which Bridging Gaps is one of the activities, thus has its roots in a 'remote' past. However, in geography, and even more so in these digital times, remote

areas can be in contact. Remote persons can bridge their gap. Likewise, in history, the past and present can meet each other. They can meet each other always with an enduring strangeness that needs respect and protection, for we can never fully come to grips with people, past and present, their day-to-day life and their perspectives. Yet, the strangeness of people as well as of texts can be a motor for deeper understanding and, even, for togetherness. That, perhaps, is the miracle of Bridging Gaps.

Twenty-five years of the Bridging Gaps programme: many of us, either as participants or as tutors and supervisors of the students' work, cherish lively memories of the groups that came together. I remember that this always involved some tensions, because some participants only received visas and tickets at the very last minute. Therefore, I particularly want to thank all the international officers and support staff who managed travel and lodging arrangements, translation, and other facilities – from communication supplies to kitchen towels – for these 25 years of Bridging Gaps.

I want to thank all the teaching staff from both our institutions, Vrije Universiteit and Protestant Theological University, who gave more than the strictly necessary energy to dialogue and guided the students in this Bridging Gaps programme, for I know that intercultural integrity and guidance in programmes like these are most rewarding and most energy-giving and -taking. For all of us, it is a joy to see former participants being involved now as lecturers and leaders in churches and societies all over the world. I remember one of the participants, a young and strong lady from India, who said, "Now I know that I do not want to be 'closer to nature' than my male colleagues, but surely we will raise the world's awareness of our being part of our natural environment."

In the past 25 years, we lived through many conflicts in many different states, areas, and institutions in the varying participating homelands of the students and staff. With sympathy and imagination, we

shared the endeavour to hear and see one another's theologies against the backdrop of those regional, ecclesial, or political conflicts. But there never was a time, as far as I recall, when we were all in a situation like the present global pandemic. We are really in this together, and we must find grace in each other's eyes, nationally as well as internationally, not blaming the other for causing the virus, but praying and working for healing.

To find grace in one another's eyes, in my view, is one of the deepest theological motives that move us towards a more Humane Society. Theologically, we find grace in the eyes of the other, which bridges the deep and powerful gaps between us, because God has graced us.

13

CHURCH AND THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF FORCED MIGRATION

The Need for Bridging the Intersecting Gaps between Church Practices, Theological Reflections and Community Solidarity

Bishop Manuel Ernesto

1. Introduction

This article aims to stimulate an exploratory conversation concerning Church and theology in the context of forced migration to contribute to the quest for a common standpoint through which collaborative actions could be taken by churches, academic theological centres, and caring communities at large. There is much strength, I strongly believe, in bringing together church leadership, academic theological competence, and social practice.

Therefore, first, this article highlights the impact of migration on our current national and global contexts. Second, it highlights some key motivations for Christians to involve in the migration crisis. Third, it identifies some essential Christian resources, while also noting the limitations in addressing migration and forced migration from a

Christian perspective – the key question on this point is what Christians can offer to the current debate on migration and refugees and what prevents them from fully using these life-giving means. Fourth, it notes an ecclesial, theological, and communal gap in addressing forced migration and 'refugeehood.' Fifth, it calls for a shift from reflecting and acting from a particular extreme of Christian life and proposes complementarity and collaboration (standing in the hidden gap) between the Church, theology, and community to enable a move towards a more sustainable Christian response to migration and the refugee crisis. The article ends by commending intercultural and contextual programmes, such as the Bridging Gaps exchange programme, that not only allow real-life engagement with church life, theological reflections, and community but also, more importantly, raise, model, and liberate a world-wide community of church practitioners, theological thinkers, and community leaders.

2. The Impact of Migration on our Current National and Global Contexts

Our current national and global contexts are characterised increasingly by fluidity in terms of people living across cultures, faiths, and nation states. Today's geographical borders seem to be supplanted by social borders created by migration and refugeehood.

We are living in the age of migration[178]. Migration, according to the United Nations (UN), is the major challenge faced by nations, with the total number of migrants estimated at 258 million, equivalent to 50% of the total European population.[179] The massive number of people moving

[178] Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (New York: Guilford press, 2009).

[179] United Nations, *International Migration Report 2017* (New York: United Nations, 2017).

across national borders is, according to David Hollenbach, one of the defining characteristics of today's world.[180]

Migration is a social reality in every generation. It is far more ancient than our geographical and socially constructed borders. Human beings, by nature, are always on the move and are *homo viators*.[181] However, the current unprecedented flow of people is what makes modern migration structurally unsustainable.

Forced migration and refugeehood are negative aspects of migration that must be resolved by the collaboration between home and hosting societies. In fact, the majority of migrants leave their countries due to structural reasons and economic structures imposed against their will.[182] Over 15 million have fled from conflicts in their home countries.[183] The northern province of Nampula in Mozambique is home to 17,000 refugees from Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, and South Sudan, who live in the UN camp of Marratane. Some have been there for almost 15 years, with no prospect of returning home or getting Mozambican citizenship. For many, refugeehood and statelessness seem to have become their identity. Since 2017, Islamist extremism has displaced over 300,000 people in the province of Cabo Delgado,[184] just 400 kilometres from Nampula, creating another concern for the churches and

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[180] David Hollenbach, "Migration as Challenge for Theological Ethics," *Political Theology* 12, no. 6 (2011): 807–812.

[181] Christopher Magezi and Vhumani Magezi, "Migration Crisis and Christian Response: from Daniel Groody's Image of God Theological Prism in Migration Theology to a Migration Practical Theology Ministerial Approach and Operative Ecclesiology," *HTS Teologische Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–12.

[182] David Igram, 2009; Hollenbach, loc. cit.

[183] United Nations, *International Migration Report 2017.*

[184] "Mozambique Situation Report, Update 30 Oct 2020," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed April 2021. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ Situation%20Report%20-%20Mozambique%20-%2030%20Oct%2020 20.pdf.

communities who must care for their new neighbours.

Refugees and migrants have been generously welcomed and selflessly supported, especially in townships and rural communities. Though churches are also responding by providing emergency supplies and shelter, a pastorally and theologically informed collaborative response is lacking.

Pastors, priests, catechists, laity, community leaders, and frontline communities are struggling to make sense and respond to the issues that typically affect migrants and refugees,[185] including poverty, unemployment, hunger, diseases, higher incarceration risk, gender-based violence, trauma, loss of life, and hopelessness in general. What motivates Christians to be concerned about migration, forced migration, and refugees beyond mere human needs and pious sensitivity?

3. Some Key Motivations for Christian Involvement in the Migration Crisis

Some key motivations for Christian involvement in the migration crisis that must be considered are as follows:

- The migrant nature of the God of the Bible, who reveals himself as coming from non-accessible light to creation (Gen. 1:1);
- The image of God is revealed to be present in every human being, man, and woman (Genesis 1:26), thus including migrants and refugees;
- The nature of humans as *homo viators* or endowed with the instinct of being always on the move.[186] Of particular note here is

[185] Nico A. Botha, "A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focussing on the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)," *Missionalia* 41, no. 2 (2013): 104–119.

[186] Christopher Magezi and Vhumani Magezi, "Migration Crisis and Christian Response: from Daniel Groody's Image of God Theological Prism in Migration Theology to a Migration Practical Theology Ministerial Approach and Operative

that human migration is far more ancient than our civilisations, not to mention our geographical and social arrangements;

- The incarnational nature of God in Christ, who comes down and pitches a tent as a neighbour (John 1:1) and becomes a wandering God present in a wandering Aramean;[187]
- The identity and dignity of migrants are rooted in God, their creator, a view that contradicts labelling them as illegal, undocumented, and foreigners;[188]
- The universality of migration and the refugee crisis; how it affects all humanity – what affects all must concern all in this rapidly changing world;
- The ubuntu principle of shared humanity reflected in African communality – 'I am because you are.' In other words, my identity is bound to your identity, and my destiny is bound to your destiny.

To meet the above ideals in the context of migration, there is an urgent demand for radically changing the relationships, on the one hand, between migrants and citizens and, on the other, between the societies in the home and hosting countries.[189] Further, the Christian resources present in churches, academic theological centres, and secular and faith

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Ecclesiology," *HTS Teologische Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–12.

[187] T. Askevold, "We Are All Sons and Daughters of a Wandering Aramean," *StudentWorld* 7, no. 251 (2007): 45–50.

[188] Christopher Magezi and Vhumani Magezi, "Migration Crisis and Christian Response: from Daniel Groody's Image of God Theological Prism in Migration Theology to a Migration Practical Theology Ministerial Approach and Operative Ecclesiology," *HTS Teologische Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–12.

[189] Nico A. Botha, "A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focussing on the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)," *Missionalia* 41, no. 2 (2013): 104–119.

communities should be mobilised and effectively employed to tackle real-life issues.

4. Christian Resources in Dealing with Migration, Forced Migration, and Refugeehood, and their Limited Application to Real-Life Issues

Christians have a variety of church practices, rich theological articulations, and diverse caring communities capable of leading the quest for a sustainable response to the crisis of migration and refugees. Christians are stewards of the WORD and SACRAMENT; they have the capacity to sustain and offer meaning to the lives of migrants and refugees and facilitate their acceptance and reintegration, both as new citizens of hosting countries or as returnees in their homelands.

Juan Luis Loza Leon highlights the need for theology to refocus on real-life issues affecting refugees and migrants: otherwise, "nothing that we produce as theology will reach the migrant's hand in his/her journey to cross the border.'[190]

However, for Christians to overcome the limiting factors that prevent the WORD and SACRAMENT to speak to real-life issues, they need to reread and retrieve the true intent of the resources entrusted to them and free those gifts for the common good. In fact, the former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple (1881–1944) comments on the role of the church in society as thus: 'The church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it' – the church, simply put, is the only organisation that exists only for the benefit of its non-members.[191]

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[190] Juan Luis Loza Leon, "Renewing Theology of Migrations," *StudentWorld* 7, no. 251 (2007): 23–30.

[191] William Temple, "Letters from the Archbishop of the West Indies," *Theology* 56 (1956).

4.1 Church Practices – God's Church for All People

By church practices, I mean what Christians collectively do when they come together. According to Rowan Williams, the four essential elements that make every individual Christian feel part of a community are Bible, prayer, baptism, and Eucharist, all of which together comprise the WORD and SACRAMENT.[192]

Through baptism, people are introduced and unconditionally accepted as full members of the community of believers and are made part of the church. From this action, according to Rowan Williams, we are implicated in one another; our lives are interwoven.[193] As baptised people, we are in the business of building bridges, of opening the church of God to everyone.

The Eucharist (or, for some strands of the Christian family, the Lord's Supper) makes us welcomed guests at the Lord's table, so that we may also welcome others. It should inspire Christians to identify themselves with migrants and refugees who seek bread and life.

The Bible is inspired by God and is intended to equip believers (2 Tim. 3:16f). In some communities, especially in public worship, the Bible is read to people. Sometimes what is read is not new but repetitive, which strengthens Christians' memory and attentive listening skills, skills that make them not only good at attending to texts but also their contexts, and not only to the biblical context but also to the contemporary one.

Because the theme of migration crosses the biblical text and context as well as our contemporary context, when practicing reading Bible with a focus on the plight of the migrants and refugees, Christians can offer the insertion of resources that have been lacking in the response to

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[192] Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (London: SPCK, 2014).

[193] Williams, *Being Christian*, 2.

migration and refugee issues.[194] In the praxis cycle, insertion typically refers to the choices we make and the values we expose and identify ourselves with.[195] For Henriot, there must be a preferential option for the poor, and that preference, Groody suggests, must be extended to migrants and refugees.[196]

4.2 Theological Reflection – God's Word for All People

Theological reflection is a Christian resource that deals with the language about God to bring meaning to or interpret the context. Regarding migration and refugee issues, theological reflection deals with the question of the kind of language to use about God in the context of migration, or to formulate responses when someone asks where God is in migration.[197]

One of the reasons societies experience difficulties in responding effectively and sustainably to migration issues is the lack of the kind of compassionate language that theology is called upon to provide to the church and the wider community.

4.3 Caring Community of Solidarity – God's Universal Community for All People

There are various ways by which Christian communities are moving beyond their own established communities and finding new opportunities to connect with each other at local, national, and international levels.

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[194] Groody, 2008.

[195] Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983).

[196] Holland, *Social Analysis*; Groody, 2008.

[197] Groody, 2009; Christopher Magezi and Vhumani Magezi, "Migration Crisis and Christian Response: from Daniel Groody's Image of God Theological Prism in Migration Theology to a Migration Practical Theology Ministerial Approach and Operative Ecclesiology," *HTS Teologische Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–12.

Daniel Groody agrees that 'amidst the growing fragmentation of society manifested in the phenomenon of migration, the heart of the Christian message speaks of the call to globalize solidarity, beginning with the most vulnerable and neglected members of the human community'[20] to globalise their solidarity with marginalised and vulnerable populations, such as migrants and refugees. While divisions remain, new strategies are emerging that aim to engage one another and find common ground in a common faith, a common humanity, and a common care for those considered the least and last in the human community.

In the January 2016 edition of the World Council of Churches' *International Review of Mission*, Daniel Groody captures the spirit of the Christian communities who responded to the migration and refugee crisis by extending their solidarity and crafting new strategies.[198] As Groody recognises, Christian actions of solidarity have gaps (divisions) mainly because these actions of love and goodwill must be supported and grounded on consistent practices found in church. Moreover, these actions should be given divine language resourced by sound theology.

Expressions of Christian solidarity include the idea of ubuntu in the townships of South Africa;[199] the eucharistic love meals at the border between Mexico and the United States;[200] the migrant pastorates and faith-based advocacy groups across Europe; the Institute for Healing of Memories in South Africa;[24] the Community Hospitality and Community Dialogue in Mozambique; the transformation of refugees into citizens in Tanzania; the long-term concession of land to expatriates in Uganda, and so on. There are also, of course, several good

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[198] Daniel Groody, "Globalizing Solidarity: Christian Anthropology and Challenge of Human Liberation," *Theological Studies* 69 (June 2008): 250–68.

[199] Nico A. Botha, "A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focussing on the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)," *Missionalia* 41, no. 2 (2013): 104–119.

[200] Groody, 2011.

interventions in Europe and Asia (Asia hosts the majority of the world's migrant and refugee populations).

All these cases of philanthropic actions, however, lack the power to transform the reality of migrants and refugees, because one of the greatest needs of migrants and refugees is acceptance and affirmation of their very humanity, which, instead of being found only in secular communities, is essentially found in faith communities.

5. The Gap between Church Practices, Theological Reflection, and Community Solidarity

Despite the vibrant church practices of the WORD and SACRAMENT, and despite the sound theologies of migration and dedicated, caring Christian communities in both home and hosting countries, when it comes to extending these resources to include the migrant and refugee communities, there exists a gap.

Church practices are graced activities aimed at 'pulling the Church out of an exclusively internal focus and extending its work into [the] community it' inhabits.[201] Therefore, the Reformation fathers led by Calvin and Luther laboured to maintain these church practices as means of grace, advocating for a balanced community life of constant justification and sanctification as a twofold character of grace, focusing on freeing people (justification) on the one hand and modelling those inside the community of believers (sanctification) on the other.[202] Likewise, the English Reformation was, to some extent, an effort in refocusing the church and its practices to the wider community. The Anglican polite that considers a congregational area to be one that is not just limited to and concerned with those who attend the church but instead the entire community, an area through which the congregational

[201] Ibid, 2002

[202] Ibid, 2002

life and ministry is exercised, is testimony of the timely legacy of the Reformation to be revived in our times.

Theological reflection, instead of solving the practical problems faced by migrants and refugees, focuses on systemic factors; community solidarity is about taking action, but this is not always done using academic theological foundations. Both of these silo-based approaches deprive themselves of the rituals the church practices, and in particular liturgy, may provide. There is a sacred language that only sound theology might design, and loving and selfless service that may be found in caring communities. Without collaborative and supplementary mutual support between church, theology, and community, a Christian approach to migration will continue to fail to reach its full transformative power.

6. Shift from Reflecting and Acting from a Particular Extreme of Christian Life to Standing in the Gap

I have attempted to show that church practices must be contextualised to be relevant to modern contexts dominated by migration. I have also noted that theological reflection should lend its gift of language to inform real-life issues of migration; and in the same way, I remembered that caring and solidarity should not just try to solve the problems of migration but also find ways of modelling these actions in church practices – such as word, sacrament, and witness – while feeding the community with theological insights.

However, the question of how to bridge the gap between these strands remains. Groody recommends that the focus of the Church should be on migrants and refugee communities themselves as they develop with spiritualties that, if well guided, may transform them into better and new integrated communities in the hosting countries, communities made up of migrants and citizens.

7. Commendable Experiences and Examples of the Bridging Gaps Exchange Programme

It was in the Bridging Gaps exchange programme where I learned how to be in a pluralist society and how to appreciate the enriching side of cultural differences.

The routine and flow of the programme helped me develop my understanding. Ultimately, the programme allowed me to engage with church, theology, and the Dutch community at large, helping me attain an integrated view of the Dutch context.

Taking that experience back home and now living it out in the ministry, it is easy for me to draw from that integrated view of the context and also to observe the gaps and shadings and the need of missions in my own context. Thus, exchange programmes, if considered short-term missions, may transform Christian communities worldwide. The time of great mission enterprises is over, and short-term missions should take the lead.

8. Conclusion

This article aimed to stimulate an exploratory conversation concerning the role of church and theology in the context of forced migration. It highlighted some factors that reveal the impact of migration, forced migration, and refugee crisis; it then identified the WORD and SACRAMENT as the Christian communities' most valuable resources; it stressed the existence of a gap in the collaboration between church, theology, and community, and emphasised the need to bridge this gap by equipping both migrants themselves and those in frontline missions with the pastoral, theological, and practical means to ensure an effective migration and refugee ministry; finally, it commended exchange programmes such as the Bridging Gaps

programme for being models for further collaborative development within Christian life and ministry.

This article, in conclusion, urges the church, theology, and community to move from their own extremes and stand in the gap of risk, vulnerability, and possibility alongside the migrants, refugees, and their issues.

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14

THE LAND WILL MOURN AND THE FISH OF THE SEA WILL PERISH

Rereading Hosea in the Context of Environmental Injustice

Lady Paula R. Mandalika

1. Introduction

A massive socio-ecological crisis is happening in Indonesia. Its land, forests, rivers, and lakes are being exploited by the exploitative economy, which often views nature only as a commodity for profit, driving several non-human creatures to extinction and even causing their death and extinction. The consequences of such exploitation are not only potentially harmful to biodiversity but also to the rights of local communities who are increasingly losing control of their living environments to corporations who want to own more and more land, monopolising the spring and fresh water, ripping local trees from the ground, or engaging in destructive mining practices. The local communities are being pushed away; they are losing their source of life, their tradition, identity, and, eventually, their language. Unlike the corporations for whom nature is only a commodity, the local

communities fighting for the environment see the interconnectedness between all living creatures. However, when they attempt to protect the ecology of the environment, the nature they consider a part of their identity, they are criminalised by the corporations, and their deep connection with nature is threatened by those involved in the structural power of capital.

Starting from the concrete problem of environmental injustice in the context of Lake Poso, this article discusses the land–body metaphor and socio-ecological crises found in Hosea and the community living around Lake Poso, the Aliansi Penjaga Danau Poso (APDP), who reads the story of Hosea. First, I briefly describe the context of environmental injustice in Lake Poso. Second, I discuss the communal reading of Hosea 1–2 and 4:1–3. Then I explore the socio-economic dynamics of eighth-century Israel and compare them with the context of APDP.

The community living around the ancient Lake Poso in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, strives together to overcome the trauma of communal conflicts of 1998, a religiously polarised conflict, working together to build peace and attain justice. Since Central Sulawesi is rich in natural resources, many corporations have begun palm oil plantation factories, nickel mining, and hydroelectric projects there. Currently, Lake Poso is being threatened by another hydroelectric project of the Poso Energy Company, which first opened its operation in Sulewana in 2005. Then, in 2018, it started another project at the mouth of the lake, where the Pamona ancestors had built a wooden bridge. Despite protests from the local community, the project commenced, destroying the traditional bridge, the community's symbol of unity, and replacing it with a new iron bridge.

To increase the water flow to the company's hydro turbines, it then dredged 12.8 km from Lake Poso, a well-known home to many different native animals, such as eel fish or *masapi*. The dredging clouded the lake's water, disturbed its ecosystem, and killed the fish. The dredged soil is then dumped into KompoDongi, an important area whose ecosystem functions as the natural food source for fish and birds. It is also a spawning area. The dumping can change the natural landscape of KompoDongi, threatening the ecosystem and biodiversity of Lake Poso.

The local community's identity is formed by its close interaction with Lake Poso. In the community mapping, the participants sketched the lake and their experiences of injustice in the struggle with the Poso Energy Company. According to Participant P2, the community may lose their sustainable fishing practices – such as *mosango*, *monyilo*, and *wayamasapi* – due to the threat of the companies.[203] A fishing practice such as *wayamasapi* is based on mutuality, solidarity, and partnership, with six to nine families from different tribes sharing one traditional boathouse and working together. If one of the families experiences difficulties or disasters, the other families will offer help and share their catch.[204] For these different fishing practices, the fishermen utilise traditional boathouses, bamboo and rattan baskets, and fences.

Besides losing their sustainable fishing practices, the community may also lose its traditional farming practices, such as *mangore*, *mesale, and padungku*. In 2020, when the Poso Energy Company tested opening the dam's gate, the rice fields were flooded, killing the buffaloes grazing there.

[203] P2, male, 65 years old, leader of Adat, Community Mapping, Tentena, 2020.

[204] Pian Siruyu, "Waya Masapi, ketika Bambu dan Ikan Merajut Kekeluargaan," accessed October 18, 2020, http://www.mosintuwu.com/2018/05/23/waya-masapi/.

2. Land and Body Imagery in Hosea

Generally, the interpretations of the book of Hosea have largely focused on its religious crisis, specifically the opposition between the worship of Yhwh and Baal.[205] According to most of the interpretations, Gomer represents the worship of Baal, while Hosea represents God, who tried hard to restore the relationship between Israel and Yhwh and the love of His people.[206] According to R. Abma's slightly different interpretation, the marriage metaphor in Hosea, which will be discussed in part 4 of this article, does not deal with the opposition between the worship of Yhwh and Baal but, instead, between the two forms of Yhwh worship – the genuine and the perverted. Focusing on an intra-biblical concept of the covenant, the metaphor, she concludes, represents the different bonds of love.[207]

In my view, interpreting Hosea as a metaphor for a religious crisis is too limiting, as doing so makes one miss several other elements in the text. It could also make one turn a blind eye to the text's negative portrayal of the body and nature. Feminist scholars have criticised the negative imagery in Hosea. For instance, Athalya Brenner argues that, compared to men, women are usually negatively portrayed in this book.[208] Moreover, according to Carole Fontaine, a relationship in which

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[205] A. de Kuiper, *Kitab Hosea* (Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2010), 6.; Gordon McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Prophets* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 144; Graham I. Davies, *Hosea: New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans, 1992).

[206] David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Nottingham, England: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 20.

[207] Richtsje Abma, *Bonds of Love: Methodic Studies of Prophetic Texts with Marriage Imagery* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 1999), 29; 139.

[208] Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 28.

the spouse is willing to use violent approaches to restore the relationship is a questionable one.[209] These critical views, I believe, are important in making us rethink the marriage metaphor. Since neither the critical issue of land nor the ecological perspective of Hosea has received much scholarly attention, in this paper, I aim to examine the extent to which the APDP reading, focusing on the land and body imagery in Hosea, can function as a process for justice. Engaging with actual readers, I argue that the metaphor in Hosea 1–2 and 4:1–3 is a political one, signalling disintegration, socio-economic injustice, the interconnectedness of human actions, and the wellbeing of nature.

3. Aliansi Penjaga Danau Poso's (APDP) Community Reading

After reading the text, the group highlighted a few themes. First, they highlighted the position of the priest, who is highly criticised, in the text as one of the important aspects of Hosea. Participant P1 said, "The text mentioned criticism to the priest in the last part. Israel was being condemned at the time, and if the people were misled, they were misled by their leader. So, the passage specifically mentions that priests were rebuked by God." He continued by sharing how, in the local community's context, the church leaders are involved in and supporting the plan of the company. "When someone questions the statement of the head of the synod on this matter," he added, "then the head of the synod said that's enough, this might not be understood today, but later God will give an understanding that this will indeed bring prosperity to the community."[210] Participant P1 interpreted the fornication in the text as

[209] Carole R. Fontaine, "A Response to Hosea," in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 64.

[210] P1, male, 65 years old, radio broadcaster, Intercontextual Bible Reading, Tentena, March 2020.

the fornication between church leaders and the company, who are only concerned with profits and the dream of prosperity, turning a blind eye to the threats to the community and nature brought on by the forces of economic and social change.

Another participant talked about the disruption of the pattern of life they have always known. As a community that lives at the mercy of nature, they live together with nature. Their knowledge and traditions are formed by their interactions and partnerships with nature. Participant P4 said the following:

> If we relate the text of Hosea to our context, the result of the promiscuity is division, poverty, ignorance, lying, and betrayal. Our hope should be in God and not in the Bukaka company. God gave us a lake, and it is amazing to see all the things that we have in Tentena. If you stick a branch of cassava into the ground, it will grow easily. What can the Bukaka company give to us? Instead, they rob us and cause infidelity everywhere, while the government and church leaders think that the Bukaka company is a saviour.[211]

This comment strongly relates to the messages in Hosea 2:10, which emphasise that it is God who gave grain, new wine, and fresh oil. Another important comment concerns the patriarchal nature of the metaphor. Only one participant, Participant M, commented on this:

The metaphor looks so patriarchal. The metaphor still sees the woman as the one who commits fornication. In our context nowadays, it can be done either by a man or a woman. When I heard the story, the metaphor looks very patriarchal to describe the wrongdoing, including about the first husband and the second husband. Her sin is double, many times. It is not only because she was called a promiscuous woman, but

[211] P4, female, 48 years old, housewife and radio broadcaster, Intercontextual Bible Reading, Tentena, March 2020.

she was also described as polyandrous. That is the choice of the metaphor.'[212]

However, the rest of the group did not interpret the text in relation to gender; they instead focused on social promiscuity. They read the fornication in the text as social fornication, in light of their struggle with social and economic issues and the exploitative powers of religious leaders, the local government, and the corporation. They criticised the forced changes to their social-economic realities, the threats to their values of unity, cooperation, solidarity, and partnership with nature. The forced changes the religious leaders assume will bring grain, wine, and oil – the symbols of prosperity – actually threaten the survival of not only the community but also the environment.

4. The Socio-economic Dynamics of Eighth-century Israel and Judah

The reconstruction of the socio-economic dynamic of eighth-century Israel and Judah will be used to explore the function of Hosea's metaphor. During the decentralisation period, Israel's social system was a unique organisational unit. Each subdivision of the social structure – שבט, משפחה, בתאב – had its own social functions. The שבט (shēvet; tribe) had socio-political, military, and territorial functions.[213] The משפחה (mishpāhāh; kinship group) had, in addition to its military function, the function of protecting the solidarity of its members.[214] Lastly, the בתאב (bēth-'āv; household), the smallest unit, was a self-sufficient system, with its members depending on each other for survival, using a

[212] M, female, 43 years old, activist, Intercontextual Bible Reading, Tentena, March 2020.

[213] Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1980), 245–253.

[214] Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 257–270.

communal land tenure system where land was held and used together by a kinship. There was thus a shared communal network and exchange of economic needs. The surplus was mainly stored, anticipating famines. If there was a problem in self-sufficiency, the משפחה (mishpāhāh; kinship group) offered relief without charging interest.[215]

The socio-political changes in eighth-century Israel and Judah from a decentralised society to a centralised one led to several tensions. Before centralisation, each unit of בתאב (bēth-ʻāv; household) could access the land for farming and livelihood, but then the land tenure system was privatised, creating large estates that forced aside the egalitarian ideal, with large landowners, officials, military, and merchants setting themselves above traditional small farmers who only wanted to be self-sufficient.[216] The smallest unit of בתאב (bēth-ʻāv; household) is used as an important metaphor in Hosea to describe the societal disintegration ushered in by the forced changes to the socio-economic system.

The unit of בתאב (bēth-ʻāv; household) in Hosea 1–2 focuses on the relationship between Hosea, Gomer, and their children. Many scholars have emphasised that the metaphor in Hosea is a 'marriage metaphor,' focusing on how the challenges in a relationship between husband and wife represent the relationship between God and His people. However, according to Alice A. Keefe, because of the centrality of the family in traditional Israeli social structure, it is not a marriage metaphor but a family one. This family metaphor reflects the social conflicts triggered by economic and social changes. Keefe especially analyses it in a discussion of the woman's body as a symbol of the social body.[217]

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[215] Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 292.

[216] Reiner Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 160.

[217] Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 190-193.

I hold the same opinion as Keefe, but I argue that the text, even from its beginning, uses בתאב (bēth-ʿāv; household) as a metaphor to describe the challenges to the shared communal network and the kinship bond, including the relation of בתאב (bēth-ʿāv; household) with the land, caused by centralisation. The relationships that existed in Israel's decentralised system – kinship bonds, the offering of mutual help in times of economic need, and the belief that the land belongs to God – are absent in the centralised period. The text thus uses 'husband,' 'wife,' 'mother,' 'children,' and the land as vehicles to illustrate the disintegration of the kinship bond and the mutual communal network.

In Hosea 1:2, the LORD says to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of fornication and have children of fornication because the land behaves promiscuously away from the LORD." Interestingly, the act of fornication in the text is related not only to the wife and children but also to the land. This is an important point that should not be overlooked, as the mutual shared network and life-giving relations in Israel's social system are closely linked to the land. A family's kinship bond was closely tied to the land. However, with centralisation, the women, children, and the land became linked by the common term *znh*, which means to behave promiscuously. Social disintegration could thus also mean being disconnected from the land. The text highlights this connection and disconnection from the beginning. During social conflicts, the land became just a commodity, social relationships were motivated by profit, and solidarity disintegrated.

In the next verses of Hosea 1:3–9, Gomer becomes pregnant and gives birth to children whose names are symbolic of the social conflict in Israel, implying negativity: Jezreel, Lo-ruhama (not pitied), and Lo-ami (not my people). Jezreel means "God's sowing," but the term in Niphal could also refer to impregnation. It is possible that this double meaning was intended, and again a connection with the land is present. Carole Fontaine, a feminist scholar, reminds us that Gomer and her

children play no role in most discussions on the book of Hosea.[218] Most of the arguments show how Gomer and her children play a significant role in a metaphorical reading, and how she reflects the distress of the socio-economic system in eighth-century Israel and Judah. Especially in the family metaphor, the wife, mother, and children represent the communal network in Israel's social structure, the wife possibly representing the elite rulers, the children the peasantry.

However, the kinship bond, rooted in a mutual socio-economic system, as reflected by אב בת (ʿāv-bēth), no longer exists. Through the metaphor of family disintegration, the text expresses concern for social disintegration, for the shared exchange of economic needs, and for a communal network coming to an end. Moreover, the desire for bread and water, wool and linen, oil and drinks (Hosea 2:7) symbolises the elite rulers' desire for profit and wealth. The land that was used to produce basic means for self-sufficiency becomes private land, where the production would be traded among the nations. This situation concerns a change not only in production but also in identity, with kinship bonds and mutual shared networks being threatened by disintegration and dysfunctional leadership. Hosea 2:10 thus emphasises that it is God who gave the grain, new wine, and fresh oil. He multiplied Gomer's silver and gold, but she did not know. Similarly, God multiplied Israel's wealth, but the elite rulers did not know this, so they chased the profit and wealth from others (foreign alliances). The social, economic, and political fornication signifies not only Israel's broken relationship with itself but also with God. Besides the fornication metaphor, the external and internal broken relationships, according to

[218] Fontaine, "A Response to Hosea," 62.

Seong-Hyuk Hong, are also described in terms of illness in Hosea 5:13; 6:1; 7:1,5.[219]

The other important element in the metaphorical understanding is the connection between land, body, and the destruction of nature. Only one participant shared her concerns about the metaphor's patriarchal nuances. Her voice, though marginal, is important, especially when most current interpretations do not situate the Hosea metaphor in gender discussions, arguing the irrelevance of doing so.

According to Alice Keefe, a woman's body representing a fertile land signifies an integrative communal symbol, reflecting its structure of kinship and the intimate relationship between families and their land.[220] Keefe further explains how this association formed the identity of families and the relationship between families and their land. However, in Hosea 1, I see that the woman is described only in terms of her maternal functions: 'conceived,' 'bore,' and 'weaned.' Hosea shows how a woman's body that is seen as fertile land signifies the intimate relationship between Gomer and the land that gives life, as Keefe argues. Women and nature, Vandana Shiva argues, work in partnership with each other, and both nature and women, Shiva emphasises, are producers of life, a productivity that differs sharply when viewed from the perspective of self-sufficient survival and from the dominant perspective of capital accumulation.[221] Shiva thus highlights the link between the violation of nature and the violation and marginalisation of the women who live in partnership with nature. However, besides being described as giving life, both the woman and land in Hosea are portrayed negatively. The woman's punishment for her nakedness

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[219] Seong-Hyuk Hong, *The Metaphor of Illness and Healing in Hosea and Its Significance in the Socio-Economic Context of Eight Century Israel and Judah,* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 132.

[220] Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 216.

[221] Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (New Delhi, India: Kali for Women, 1988), 42–43.

relates closely to the devastation of the land that becomes a wasteland in 2:5–14, implying that the woman will become like the wilderness, a dry land, and will die of thirst. Hosea thus clearly uses the symbolic picture of nature and the woman's body negatively to describe the violation of God's laws.

Afterward, Hosea uses a shifting image of nature in a more positive way: nature becomes fruitful when the woman becomes faithful. This positive image of nature linked with the positive image of the woman is a sign of hope for a better relationship. However, this association between nature and women has been criticised by feminists like Rosemary Radford Ruether, who emphasises that identifying women with nature is problematic. According to her, we need to question both the negative images of women and nature as inferior, as well as the image of nature as a giving and generous mother. She argues for the deconstruction of the dualism of women as nature and men as culture.[222] The association of women with nature will thus always need to be read critically. The woman in Hosea is used symbolically to describe Israel's elite rulers, who are men. Her actions represent the actions of the elite rulers, who prefer economic surplus for themselves rather than the survival of the mutual relationship between community and land. Therefore, I would argue, it is possible that the imagery is not directly referring to women. However, I disagree with Keefe that the female imagery in Hosea is far removed from the symbolic complex of nature, women, sex, and sin. I think the metaphor also evokes affective contributions of the associating women with nature. It needs to be read critically.

The connection between human action and the devastation of nature is described in chapter 4: 1–3. All human actions of cursing, deceiving,

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[222] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," *Feminist Theology* 3, no.9 (1995): 50.

murdering, stealing, committing adultery, and bloodshed will bring devastation, the land will mourn, and everyone will grow weak. Besides 'mourn,' the word תאבל could also mean 'dry out.' Interestingly, both meanings play significant roles in our understanding of the verse. The land will dry out and become associated with drought and devastation. The devastation will make animals, birds, and fish perish. Hosea 4 thus emphasises the role of human behaviour in the destruction of nature. Moreover, according to the previous chapters, the disintegration of solidarity and mutual communal networks, as well as the disconnection to the land, also brings devastation to nature. These connections were evident in the APDP community reading, with the people clearly understanding the impact of fornication on the environment by their leaders, whom they identified as Gomer in the text. They highlighted that the act of fornication for the wealth of the leaders/elite had, as they saw it in Hosea, disintegrated their communal network and brought devastation to their environment.

5. Conclusion

Rereading Hosea has expanded the prevalent understanding that Hosea is limited to religious crises. The metaphor of land and body could be used to discuss injustice and disintegration in society and nature. Moreover, Hosea also shows hope through its positive image of nature, though the association between this positive image of nature and the positive image of women needs to be read critically. Critical notes about disintegration, the threat of socio-economic injustices to a shared system, dysfunctional leadership, and the interconnectedness of human actions and the wellbeing of nature are the essential themes that emerged from the rereading of Hosea with the APDP. The forces of socio-economic change that sacrifice nature and the community's livelihood will not bring prosperity but only disaster. This rereading calls us to rethink the concept of economic development and wealth. What kind of

economic development do we want to achieve? The development of material wealth that privileges only a small percentage of people obviously generates economic inequalities and violates the rights of others. Exploiting for wealth will surely bring devastation – if the destruction continues and humans do not change their behaviour, the land will mourn, and the fish will perish.

Thus, we should not return to the previous system of economic development that destroys nature and communal survival. Instead, together, we should embrace a vision of development that integrates solidarity, mutual communal networks, life-giving relations, environmental justice, and sustainability. In the face of socio-ecological crises, the church should not remain silent but take necessary actions – we can sustain hope only by taking actions for environmental justice.

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15

THE STORY OF HOSEA AND GOMER: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

RESPONSE TO LADY MANDALIKA

Geke van Vliet

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, Lady Mandalika clearly described how one's context influences their Bible reading. This was illustrated using the example of reading groups in the Poso community that suffers from environmental injustice. The community's context of environmental injustice influences its reading of Hosea. The story of Hosea is an interesting one to reflect on from the perspective of environmental injustices in relation to gender injustices. Therefore, in this article, I will discuss the position of women in Hosea in the context of climate change.

Mandalika vividly describes how the identity of the Poso community is closely tied to the land on which they live. When companies exploit the land, they lose parts of their identity. In the Netherlands, although

there exists a special relationship with the land – for example, because of water management professions that are highly important because the Netherlands is below sea level – I would argue that it does not define the Dutch identity as deeply as it does the Poso community. In the Netherlands, the land is not quite deeply connected to our ancestors, nor are there deeply rooted rituals related to the land that define a Dutch identity. Yet, even then, the realisation that people lose their identities when they lose their land impacted me. Moreover, in the story of the Poso community, the consequences of climate change become visible.

In the previous chapter, the focus was mainly on the concepts of the body, land, and nature. The notions of capitalism, power, and identity were, however, never far away, showing how all these aspects are interrelated. Land and nature are perceived as identity markers by some, but they are perceived as profitable resources by others. A capitalist perspective creates a completely different relationship to land than the perspective of identity. Whereas capitalism mostly cares about profit for economic reasons, the relationship between land and identity concerns people. If a company sees a way to make money out of land, it often does not see how deeply rooted the local communities are to their land, how their bodies are connected to their land. In this article, I will focus on the relationship between the land and the body, specifically the female body.

That this perspective of the female body is often left out in readings of Hosea is quite striking. Even when addressed, it is relegated to a marginalised position in the reading. Mandalika describes how Gomer, the woman in the story, takes a masculine position in Hosea. As such, Gomer has a position of power, and she represents the companies that engage in environmental injustices and even the religious leaders who are seduced by the companies.

The story of Hosea relates the woman, Gomer, to nature. Gomer is seen as a woman committing adultery, just as the land commits adultery.

From an eco-feminist perspective, one can argue that this connection between the female body and the land is problematic. This chapter will discuss why eco-feminists problematise the connection between the female body and nature in relation to the story of Hosea.

2. The Female Body and Nature: An Eco-feminist Perspective

Eco-feminists argue that women particularly suffer from environmental injustices and climate change. In the Bible, the burden on women to find food resources can already be found in the stories of Rebecca (Genesis 24), Rachel (Genesis 29), and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Already in biblical times, women were the ones in charge of finding water resources in nature.

However, women not only need to find enough water and wood, but they also suffer from the image that patriarchy forces on them. In Ruth's story, for example, since she does not have the means to sustain her and Naomi's life, and since she cannot give Naomi a grandchild, Ruth's only option left is to have sex with Boaz by seducing him. Luckily for her, Boaz reacts in a careful and sensitive way. Nowadays, women are prone to sexual violence, especially in fragile situations, such as environmental injustices, where they are desperate to find ways to sustain their livelihood.[223] The position of Gomer in Hosea does not offer a more promising perspective on the female body.

Eco-feminist theologians have focused on the portrayal of women and men in relation to nature. They have been critical of the ideology of domination of nature by the separation between God and nature. In the history of at least Western Christianity, God, and humankind have been placed opposite to nature. Women, although they belong to humankind,

[223] Mery Kolimon, "Vrouwen, Droogte, en Migratie," *NZR Cahier* 5, (2020): 33.

have often been placed on the side of nature, which we can also read in Hosea.

> Hosea 1:2b "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord."
>
> Hosea 2:3b I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst.

The woman commits adultery, as does the land. The woman will become infertile as the desert, a land of drought, and she will die because of thirst. Following this reading, it becomes clear that Hosea uses female symbolism to refer to nature. Gomer is already connected to the land in the first verses of Hosea 1. She is portrayed negatively, and because she is connected to the land, the land also has a negative connotation.

Elizabeth Johnson explains why this use of female symbolism is problematic, not specifically in Hosea, but more general in the history of Western Christianity:

> In classical Greek and Christian thought, women and nature are largely identified with principles of matter, potency, and passionate bodiliness while men are associated with spirit, act and rationality. Consequently, women and nature are assigned mainly instrumental value in this world and are excluded from direct contact with God imaged in analogy with transcendent male consciousness beyond the realm of coming to be and passing away.[224]

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[224] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford-Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 16-17.

The idea of men as spiritual (i.e., able to think of the transcendent) and rational beings and women as mainly functioning as matter creates a hierarchical system in which men, with their transcendent abilities, are closer to the transcendent being of God, the Almighty Father, whereas women are closer to the potential of land as the providing mother. Consequently, men dominate the lower-ranked land and the lower-ranked women, thus excluding women from direct contact with God, who, as a transcendent being, stands opposite to physical nature and, thus, women.[225]

The eco-feminist theologian Ivone Gebara adds that God is often described using masculine language, such as Father, the Lord, and He. While men find a reference in the divine being of God and claim to gain authority from this male God, women feel excluded from the divine image. In the binary between nature and humankind, women are associated with nature and are thus made dependent on the male's will. In addition, women are considered objects that can be used in the same way as nature can be used by humankind.[226] Referring to the Earth as Mother Earth is a clear example of the problematic use of female symbolism in nature. Although in itself this might not seem problematic, it can contribute to the division between the transcendent male, depicted in the Father God, and the objectified female, depicted in nature.

The land, lakes, and forests are being exploited by humankind, and the Earth is used as an object. Women become symbols of the connection between social domination and the domination of nature.

As Johnson and Gebara state, nature and Earth are often referred to as female objects. Women are placed on the side of nature as the same sort of objects, instead of on the side of transcendence, where God and

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[225] Trees van Montfoort, *Groene Theologie* (Middelburg, The Netherlands: Skandalon, 2019), 182–184.

[226] Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 35.

men are. However, in the context of the Poso community, their relationship with nature is different. Here, nature is not seen as an object, or mainly as something one can use. The Poso community lives in direct connection with nature, their identity intertwined with it. Does this affect their interpretation of the symbolism of nature and women?

3. The Position of the Woman in Hosea

Reading the text of Hosea while being aware of this gender perspective reveals the points of view of Elizabeth Johnson and Ivone Gebara. The woman is used as an object: she must get pregnant and give birth. While I get along with the reading of Lady Mandalika that Gomer depicts the powerful elite men in the context of the Poso community, I am also curious about how an interpretation influenced by Johnson and Gebara affects the women in the Poso community.

In the reading group, only one participant mentioned the aspect of gender in the text; only one participant noted that in Hosea the woman is depicted as the wrong-doer, the one who commits adultery. It is striking, the participant argued, that only the woman commits adultery, or is depicted as such, because adultery can also be done by men. However, in Hosea, the woman is connected to the land, which also commits adultery. Although this does not come up in the Poso community reading group, I would be curious to see how this focus would affect the reading of the Hosea story. While Gomer gives birth as an objectified being, Hosea is in direct relation to God. The Hosea story talks about women but does not talk to or with women. Only Hosea can talk to God, thus confirming Johnson's argument that women are excluded from direct contact with God. God talks about women, but He only talks with the men and blames them for losing their mind. The men should have the rationale to do better, but He does not blame the women for committing adultery, as it is not their fault that they were used. One could argue that, especially at the end of Hosea 4, women are only

considered objects and passive consequences of male behaviour, as men could have known better as rational beings. The position of the woman on the side of nature is explicitly mentioned in the Hosea text, and relates to Johnson's argument.

The United Nations stated that women, in particular, face higher risks from the impact of climate change. They find themselves in an unequal position when it comes to decision-making processes and are often left out of discussions on climate-related planning, policy-making, and implementation.[227] In Hosea, this is no different. Gomer is only seen as bodily matter, providing children to Hosea, and dependent on men for her life sustenance (Hos. 2:5–8). Hosea, on the other hand, is the one who is in contact with God, the one who has consciousness and the rationale to change the tide.

Conclusion

Hosea was written before the official separation between men and women and transcendence and nature took place. Yet, one can find clear examples of the different positions of men and women in the text of Hosea. While Hosea is directly addressed by the Lord, Gomer is seen only as an object for providing children.

As Mandalika's analysis in the previous chapter shows, women are not explicitly included in the policy-making of the Poso community. The focus is mostly on the fishermen who lost their opportunity to work, but it does not say anything about the suffering of women. I would be curious to see what a focus on the gender perspective would do to the reading group's interpretation.

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[227] "Gender and Climate Change: An Important Connection," United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed August 18, 2021, https://unfccc.int/gender.

Since I lack knowledge of the Poso community and its demographics, and since I do not know the composition of the Bible reading group, I hesitate to jump to conclusions. Still, I would be curious to see how my proposed perspective on the negative effect of female symbolism in nature affects the reading group's engagement with Hosea. Are the women in the community affected by the division between men/transcendence on one hand and women/nature on the other? Or is the Poso community in such an intertwined relationship with nature that the division between a historic reading and a natural reading, as concluded by Gebara, never took place?

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16

CONCLUDING NOTE

BRIDGING GAPS: A GIFT FROM THE WORLD CHURCH TO THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN THE NETHERLANDS

Corrie van der Ven

1. The Human Factor: the Secret of the Bridging Gaps Programme

Kerk in Actie, the Mission and Diaconia Department of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, congratulates Bridging Gaps on its 25th anniversary[228]. These congratulations go from one computer screen to another, which feels contrary to what the Bridging Gaps programme is about. When I think of Bridging Gaps, I think of face-to-face encounters among students and lecturers, singing, eating, hugging. However, despite the fact that we cannot meet in person now, the Bridging Gaps spirit was very much present during the online symposium. That says something about its strength.

[228] This contribution is the written text of what was said during the online anniversary celebration, partly in response to what other speakers shared.

The secret of the Bridging Gaps programme has perhaps to do with what Funlola Oluseyi Olojede in her contribution calls the 'human factor.' Texts matter, contexts matter, but, most of all, living texts matter – the community in which we read holy texts together.

Funlola applied that to the Bridging Gaps programme itself. When she was a Bridging Gaps student, around ten years ago, she visited local congregations in the Netherlands, such as in Geldermalsen. 'I cannot remember all the sermons,' she said, 'but the hospitality remains in my heart.' Human encounters, reading biblical texts with each other, experiencing hospitality – these are the memorable parts of the Bridging Gaps programme, and perhaps of the Church in general. I think that this resonates with many Bridging Gaps alumnae/-i. Many of them must have fond memories of their encounters in Amsterdam or in the local congregations and feel part of what Professor Hans de Wit called the 'Bridging Gaps family.'

I believe that Bridging Gaps is one of the most beautiful programmes that Kerk in Actie, together with other partners, supports. There are many reasons for this. In the first place, because of the more than 200 Bridging Gaps alumnae/-i who have substantially contributed and will remain contributing to the life of their churches and universities. Bringing young theologians from all over the world together to broaden their horizons, to sharpen their thinking and strengthen their beliefs – that is an incredibly strong concept. Especially when there is such a committed team of coordinators from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Protestant Theological University, student assistants, lecturers, supervisors, and buddies who offer their brains, patience, and time to this programme. As Professor Mechteld Jansen rightly pointed out, it has not always been an easy process, and it is due to the dedication of everyone that the Bridging Gaps programme has become what it is today.

2. Transforming Christian Communities Worldwide by Appreciating 'the Other'

As a representative of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, I would also like to highlight – and this is the second reason why I think Bridging Gaps is such a beautiful programme – the importance of the Bridging Gaps programme for the Dutch congregations. The 'human factor' is as important for the local churches as it is for the Bridging Gaps students.

In his contribution, Bishop Manuel Ernesto shared his important experiences with Bridging Gaps, which apply to the Dutch churches too: 'Through the Bridging Gaps programme, I learned to live in a pluralistic world' and 'I returned home with a wider appreciation of the other.' This is what the Church, and in this particular case Bridging Gaps, offers to the world: through our ecumenical network,[229] people learn to respect and sometimes even understand others' perspectives. Ernesto also said that 'short-term exchange programmes may transform Christian communities worldwide.' Indeed, churches become richer churches when they are conversation with others, nearby and far away. Our complex world with so many interconnections needs churches that offer safe spaces, spaces where people can learn to deal with differences, to learn how to live in a pluralistic world. The programme and students of Bridging Gaps can help us fulfil this task.

The Protestant Church in the Netherlands is reflecting on the notion of the Church as the worldwide body of Christ amidst eight billion people. Within the Protestant Church the awareness has grown that the Dutch churches need the international Christian community for new and broader perspectives, for postponing judgements, for discernment, for introspection, for inspiration, for not taking ourselves too seriously. But this is not easy. This is partly because of old paradigms: Dutch churches

[229] E.g., the World Council of Churches already connects more than 500 million Christians.

are more used to or more comfortable *giving* something to churches abroad (e.g., the gospel, money, and so on) than being challenged and transformed by the international Christian community. In other words, it is easier for us to give than to change. But what we see through the Bridging Gaps programme is that students can make a difference. If they visit local congregations, something happens. What cannot be communicated so easily to the local congregations by us, Kerk in Actie staff (e.g., the importance of ecumenical exchange), has been shown and communicated by the Bridging Gaps students in face-to-face encounters.

3. The Experiences of Local Churches with Bridging Gaps Students

The feedback that Kerk in Actie receives from the local congregations who have hosted Bridging Gaps students is illuminating, and I like to share some of it. All the congregations are positive about meeting Bridging Gaps students and hearing stories from other countries and from other churches. This surprises me because when we, Kerk in Actie, try to say something about ecumenism, partnership, mutuality, or being part of a world church, and so on, it does not seem to resonate so much. However, when a Bridging Gaps student visits a local church, there is no lack of enthusiasm whatsoever. Moreover, the local church often invites another Bridging Gaps student in following years. Many Dutch congregations are still in contact with one or more Bridging Gaps students who have visited them during the 25 years of the programme. This varies from sending postcards for Christmas to visiting students in their home country.

The initial reason for a local congregation inviting a Bridging Gaps student can be very practical. For example, the local congregation supports a Kerk in Actie project in India, and believes that it is helpful to invite a student from India who can share something about the context

of that project. But what starts as a very practical visit soon results in what the worldwide Church is about: relationships.

Sometimes, Bridging Gaps students visit the congregation for a Sunday morning service, and sometimes they are invited for a whole weekend. This gives an extra boost to the lives of the congregations. One of the congregations in Huissen even celebrated 10 years of hosting Bridging Gaps students by having a special programme for the local congregation.

Contributions of the Bridging Gaps students to local congregations vary. Sometimes, they contribute to the church service by singing a song in a local language or doing an Orthodox prayer; sometimes they preach or offer a presentation about their church and country before or after the church service.

What congregations learn is that themes in the Bible may have an urgency in Latin America, Africa, Asia, etc., that is not seen or felt in the Netherlands. Fortunately, the Bridging Gaps students are trained to relate the biblical texts to their contexts. A sermon of a Bridging Gaps student about Genesis 13, for instance, in which Abram and Lot overlook the land, did not contain abstract reflections. The student instead spoke about the daily struggles over land rights, and the sermon became a plea for action. Another student showed how encouraging and liberating biblical texts can be for the women in her country where patriarchy is the norm. Whereas Dutch Christians tend to see patriarchy in the Bible, Christians from the Global South see in it values that go against their patriarchal culture. A third Bridging Gaps student challenged some stereotypes of Indonesia among the members of a Dutch congregation. This student shared that, instead of being oppressed by Muslims, which is a common perception of Indonesia by Dutch church members, Indonesian Christians often collaborate with Muslims. A final example is that a Dutch congregation learned from a Bridging Gaps student about the lack of freedom of religion and belief in his

country, realising that living in a free country with human rights and a rule of law, where it is easy to go to church, cannot be taken for granted.

What is perhaps the most important aspect of these exchanges is that we, the Dutch, realise that we have a context too. And that our reading of the Bible is maybe not so universal, but also contextual and limited, that we need each other to understand the width and length and height and depth of God's love.

4. The Next Twenty-Five Years

I see opportunities to deepen the relations between Bridging Gaps students and Dutch churches even further. Especially when we take Professor Hans de Wit's suggestion seriously about setting up an international and intergenerational virtual Bridging Gaps University.

The current exchanges are short, but we could take more advantage of these encounters – for instance, by offering contextual Bible studies about social issues in the Netherlands, where we need voices from the outside, voices from the Bridging Gaps students and alumnae/-i. I am thinking about climate change, racism, and migration, topics that need reflection beyond borders. In this way, we can benefit even more from the learning opportunities Bridging Gaps students offer and recognise our biases and blind spots better. In this way, we can develop a safe space in churches, where we can learn and deal with our differences.

This also applies to the exchanges between the Bridging Gaps students and the Dutch students of theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Protestant Theological University. Fortunately, these exchanges have become stronger over the course of 25 years. The more Dutch theology students meet with Bridging Gaps students, the better it is for churches.

In short, the Bridging Gaps programme bridges many gaps, including the gap between the Dutch churches and the churches

elsewhere, which offers the possibility of strengthening true, ecumenical partnerships between churches.

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In 2000, Darío Barolin participated in the Bridging Gaps program. At that time, Barolin just started a PhD research in Old Testament studies on a narrative reading of Exodus 32-34. Darío Barolin, born in Argentina, currently works as a pastor in the Waldensian church in Uruguay, as executive secretary of the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in Latin America (AIRPAL), and as a teacher in Old Testament at the local seminary (previously at the ecumenical seminary in Buenos Aires).

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Manuel Ernesto currently serves as the Bishop of Anglican Diocese of Nampula and Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique and also the liaison Bishop for the environment in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. In the last ten years he has been living and working with refugee communities, mainly from Eastern Africa and the Great Lakes Region (including Burundi, Rwanda, the DRC) as well as South Sudan and Somalia. Bishop Manuel Ernesto is a Bridging Gaps alumnus from the 2010 class.

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My name is Melissa Rosales, I am 24 years old and I am a Latin American woman born in Ecuador. I studied Christian Theology and I like to combine it with intersectional feminism and my social reality. I dream that the patriarchal and macho culture in which I live, one day transforms and becomes a safer space for women and the entire non-heteronormative community. Rosales was one of the participants of the Bridging Gaps programme in 2021.

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BUILDING BRIDGES TOWARDS A MORE HUMANE SOCIETY

In 1994, the Bridging Gaps programme started with four students at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Now, the programme that is aimed at engaging students in contextual theological reflections and intercultural exchange yearly brings a group of 15 students from all over the world to Amsterdam.

This volume is the depiction and elaboration of the eponymous symposium that was held in 2020 to celebrate the Bridging Gaps programme's 25th anniversary. Contributors are people who have been engaging with the programme as students, staff or representatives of partner organisations.

This volume is divided into two: 'Contextual theology and contextual biblical interpretation as catalysts for academic theology' and 'A catalyst for community: contextual theology and churches.' The first part covers issues as LGBTQI+ acceptance, economy and impoverishment, gender-based violence and the position of women in biblical texts and churches. The second part of the volume concerns how local communities respond to a migration crisis and climate crisis.

Kirsten van der Ham (1996) is coordinator of the Bridging Gaps programme and PhD candidate at the Protestant Theological University. Her research explores how Dutch churches can engage with racism through contextual Bible reading.

Geke van Vliet (1993) is student assistant of the Bridging Gaps programma and a PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria in the field of ecotheology, youth and feminism.

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