

## Heteropatriarchy’s Blame Game: Reading Genesis 37 with *Izitabane* during COVID 19

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### ABSTRACT

*The COVID 19 pandemic compounded the insecurity and vulnerability experienced by LGBTIQ+ people who remain confined to their family homes during the lockdown in South Africa. LGBTIQ+ people are often referred to as Izitabane, a term that gives derogatory expression to the othering, stigmatisation and exclusion experienced by LGBTIQ+ people in African contexts in general and African faith communities in particular. As the pandemic unfolded, faith leaders reached out to their flock via social media through online worship services and daily devotions. In some instances, these devotions sought “theological clarification” for the pandemic and in the process evoked violence towards the LGBTIQ+ community who were held responsible. In order to engage critically and creatively with these life-denying realities and to search for impulses of hope and life, an episode from the Joseph narrative found in Gen 37 has been appropriated as a reflective surface in the development process of Contextual Bible Study resources engaging the African faith and sexuality landscape. Building on insights gained from employing the tools of Queer Biblical Hermeneutics to read Gen 37, the final part of the essay describes the Contextual Bible Study developed jointly by the Ujamaa Centre at UKZN and Inclusive and Affirming Ministries and offers it as a resource for Izitabane to resist normalisation, correction and annihilation when the Biblical text is used in a life-denying manner.*

**KEYWORDS:** Heteropatriarchy, Contextual Bible Study, Genesis 37, COVID-19, Izitabane

### A BODIES CHALLENGING THE SCRIPT

In the first part of the essay, we offer critical systemic reflections on the underlying constructions informing the stigmatisation, exclusion and violence directed at the bodies of LGBTIQ+ people in the African context.

Desire, intimacy and connection expressed by bodies outside of the heteropatriarchal script often experience corrective gender and sexual policing

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that range from name calling, denial of gender affirming healthcare and misgendering to violent annihilation. Considering that our bodies constitute the place in and through which we as human beings encounter experiences, these experiences are inescapable and are engraved on our bodies even before we are born.<sup>1</sup> The gendered script constitutes the framework in which our bodies perform cultural and religious norms, beliefs and values that produce acceptable embodied products that contribute to the well-being of society, culture, and faith communities.<sup>2</sup> When people who self-identify as Lesbian,<sup>3</sup> Gay,<sup>4</sup> Bisexual,<sup>5</sup> Transgender,<sup>6</sup> Intersex<sup>7</sup> and Questioning/Queer<sup>8</sup> (LGBTIQ+) embodying cultural and religious norms, beliefs and values that differ from the norm, their normalcy is questioned. These questions and the underlying assumptions presuppose a stable standard against which LGBTIQ+ people's sexual orientation, gender identity<sup>9</sup> and expression and sex characteristics are measured. The insistence on seemingly stable standards of normalcy<sup>10</sup> and subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the notion of the body's inescapability, see the work of the Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell on masculinity construction. Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 1995). Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19/6 (2005): 829–859.

<sup>2</sup> Gust A. Yep, "From Homophobia and Heterosexism to Heteronormativity," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 6/3-4 (2002):163–176, 168, 171.

<sup>3</sup> "Women who are primarily sexually attracted to other women." Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury, 2011), 4.

<sup>4</sup> "Men who are primarily sexually attracted to other men." Cheng, *Radical Love*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> "People who are sexually attracted to both women and men." Cheng, *Radical Love*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Persons "who identify with a gender that is different from their assigned sex at birth are 'transgender.'" Cheng, *Radical Love*, 4. Furthermore, Cheng points out that transgender people may or may not have had medical treatment (for example, hormones or surgery) to "align their physical bodies with their gender identities" (Ibid., 4).

<sup>7</sup> "An intersex person may have testes, XY chromosomes, and a clitoris, and breasts. They may have ovaries, XX chromosomes, and a clitoris large enough to look more like a penis. They may have XXY chromosomes, or a mixture of XX and XY chromosomes. They may have one testis and one ovary, or a 'mixed' gonad called an ovotestis. They may have genitals, which appear 'ambiguous,' different from those of a typical female or of a typical male." Susannah Cornwall, ed., *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible: Troubling Bodies in Church, Text, and Society* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 1.

<sup>8</sup> "People who decline to identify with one gender or the other are 'gender queer.'" Cheng, *Radical Love*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> According to Cheng: "gender identity refers to the ways in which people self-identify with respect to their genders ('female' or 'male'), regardless of the sex that they were assigned at birth." Cheng, *Radical Love*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> According to Yep, "[n]ormalization is a symbolically, discursively, psychically, psychologically, and materially violent form of social regulation and control." Gust A.

questions raised about LGBTIQ+ people's sexuality and gender identities unveil how *Izitabane*<sup>11</sup> bodies challenge the sex,<sup>12</sup> gender and sexuality script that is ever present in the society, church and academy. This seemingly stable script is underpinned by heteropatriarchy as a systemic ideology.

## 1 Coming to terms with heteropatriarchy

In an attempt to grasp the systemic realities and mechanisms that heteropatriarchy developed and keep in place, we draw from insights generated when engaging the systematic ideology informing racism. In his ethical response to racism, Reformed ethicist Nico Koopman proposed a threefold analysis process (non-linear or intermittent) to examine how racism manifests, namely ideologically, structurally and performed in religious convictions.<sup>13</sup> The ideosystemic analytic process proposed by Koopman is appropriated and forms the basis of examining heteropatriarchy as an ideology, in structures and religious

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Yep, "The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45/2-4 (2003): 18.

<sup>11</sup> Hanzline Davids, Abongile Matyila, Sizwe Sithole and Charlene van der Walt unpack the notion of *Izitabane* and argue for appropriation of the language. "'*Nasi lesizitabane* or *lezizitabane*,' which literally translates into 'here comes these homosexuals, lesbians or gays' are words often directed at LGBTI people walking the streets in local townships. *Isitabane* (singular) or *Izitabane* (plural) is the Zulu word most frequently used in communal spaces to discriminate against, undermine and shame LGBTI people. This word is applied to both gender non-conformance and same sex desire and at times is used interchangeably with words such as *Ungqingili* (singular) or *oNgqingili* (plural), *Inkonkoni* (singular) or *Izinkonkoni* (plural). The term *Isitabane* originates from conceptual engagements with intersexuality and articulates something of the understanding of intersex people as people who possess both sexual organs traditionally associated with being a female or male. The term is consequently often applied to gays, lesbians and transgender people and refers to an individual who supposedly possesses both sexual organs and who does not conform to heteronormative orientation and gender identity. Despite the populist argument, especially from African leaders that 'homosexuality' is a so-called Western import, historical research has highlighted that in the Southern African context, *ubutabane* relationships were well established and documented." Hanzline Davids, Abongile Matyila, Sizwe Sithole and Charlene van der Walt, *Stabanisation: A Discussion Paper about Disrupting Backlash by Reclaiming LGBTI Voices in the African Church Landscape* (Johannesburg: The Other Foundation, 2019), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Thatcher defines "[s]ex [as] the division of a species into either male or female, especially in relation to the reproductive functions. Whatever else sex is, it is about the ability of species to reproduce." Adrian Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Nico N. Koopman, "Racism in Post-apartheid South Africa" in *Questions about Life and Morality: Christian Ethics in South Africa Today 16th ed.* (eds. L. Kretzschmar and L. Hulley; Pretoria: JL van Schaik, 2013), 167.

contexts. As argued by Koopman, race is an ideology.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, heteropatriarchy forms a certain picture or idea of how to understand, respond and structure reality.<sup>15</sup> These pictures or ideas that inform behaviour are formed consciously and unconsciously.<sup>16</sup> As is the case with racism, heteropatriarchy is pervasively present in structures such as, but not exclusive to, the healthcare system, education, labour, sports, and recreation based on political and economic power.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, according to Koopman, ideology is performed through religious arguments, especially in how religious texts are read, interpreted and applied.<sup>18</sup>

## 2 Ideology of Heteropatriarchy

The foundational ideology upon which this measurement tool of normalcy is based is heteropatriarchy. Heteropatriarchy derives from the conceptual combination of two systemic realities, namely the insistence on compulsory heterosexuality or heteronormativity and patriarchy. Feminist theorists<sup>19</sup> term the system of male dominance patriarchy to conceptually frame how men benefit from the “privilege, power and authority [that] are invested in masculinity and the cultural, economic and/or social positions.”<sup>20</sup>

Within this system of “cultural matrix”<sup>21</sup>, bodies are divided based upon their biological characteristics into male and female. Through customs and belief systems bodies are sexed and gendered into the dominant and “normal” sexual orientations and what these bodies “ought” to desire is prescribed.

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<sup>14</sup> Koopman, *Racism*, 154.

<sup>15</sup> Koopman, *Racism*, 167

<sup>16</sup> Koopman, *Racism*, 154.

<sup>17</sup> Koopman, *Racism*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> Koopman, *Racism*, 157, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Ruether describes feminism as “a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant and females with those defined as inferior and auxiliary.” Ruether, Rosemary R. “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (ed. Susan Frank Parsons; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.), 3. Ackermann elaborates by defining the term as: “the commitment to the praxis of liberation for women from all that oppresses us. Feminism does not benefit any specific group, race or class of women; neither does it promote privilege for women over men. It is about a different consciousness, a radically transformed perspective which questions our social, cultural, political and religious traditions and calls for structural change in all these spheres.” Denise M. Ackermann, “Meaning and Power: Some Key Terms in Feminist Liberation Theology,” *Scriptura* 44 (1993): 19–33.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavrapoulos and Joan Kirkby, *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 15; Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17.

Heterosexuality, the sexuality upon which heteropatriarchy rests, codes the body into a binary system of being either male or female.<sup>22</sup> Bodies within this system “operates as a set of hierarchically arranged roles ... which makes the masculine half of the equation positive and the feminine negative”.<sup>23</sup> Hierarchically, women are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy and although they might hold positions of power, in a patriarchal system, it is always sectioned with the consent and approval of men. Furthermore, this system essentially benefits cisgender<sup>24</sup> bodies that perform sex and gender according to the bodily reality assumed at birth. In other words, ideological heteropatriarchy socialises bodies with gender codes, roles and relations, consciously and unconsciously.

LGBTIQ+ bodies experience violence because they embody their sex, gender and sexuality differently from what heteropatriarchy deems “normal.” In the words of Butler, these bodies “fail to conform to these norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within the domain.”<sup>25</sup> In South Africa, “curative” rape is one of most violent acts that are perpetrated against queer bodies in general and black lesbians in particular,<sup>26</sup> that is, in response to the cultural heteronormative matrix. How black lesbians perform and embody their sexuality and gender fosters the perception that “[t]he lesbian body is a body out of control in a heteropatriarchal sense; that is, it is ungoverned by heteropatriarchal rules”.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, South African feminist scholar and activist Melanie Judge in *Blackwashing Homophobia: Violence and the Politics of Sexuality, Gender, and Race* states:

Both the shortfalls and the overflows of sexuality and gender are regulated through violence as a disciplining strategy employed against all social subjects, crafting the contours of what ‘real men’ and ‘real women’ should be, and what happens to them if they are not.<sup>28</sup>

The “disciplining strategy” takes on multiple forms that regulate the embodiment of LGBTIQ+ bodies “from within the domain.” During the national lockdown, LGBTIQ+ bodies were exposed to intersectional disciplining strategies with the compounding effect increasing vulnerability and insecurities.

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<sup>22</sup> Cranny-Francis, et al., *Gender Studies*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cranny-Francis, et al., *Gender Studies*, 1–2.

<sup>24</sup> “[P]eople who identify with a gender that is aligned with their birth sex.” Cheng, *Radical Love*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Thabo Msibi, “Denied Love: Same-Sex Desire, Agency and Social Oppression among African Men Who Engage in Same-Sex Relations,” *Agenda* 27/2 (2013): 106.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Hawthorne, “Ancient hatred and its contemporary manifestation: The torture of lesbians,” *Journal of Hate Studies* 4 (2005): 33 -58.

<sup>28</sup> Melanie Judge, *Blackwashing Homophobia: Violence and the Politics of Sexuality, Gender and Race* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

## **B COMPOUNDING EFFECTS OF COVID 19 ON LGBTIQ+ VULNERABILITY**

The COVID19 pandemic contributed to the increase in insecurity and vulnerability that LGBTIQ+ people experience. LGBTIQ+ people are vulnerable to intersecting oppressions because of sex, race, class and gender and as refugees and asylum seekers denied access to healthcare. The national government instituted lockdown regulations that placed limitations on the movement of citizens and had major implications for *Izitabane* people and the examples offered below illustrate clearly the structural dimensions of an oppressive ideology as discussed by above.<sup>29</sup>

### **1 Structural Heteropatriarchy**

Trans and gender diverse (TGD) people experienced increased insecurities and vulnerabilities during the COVID19 pandemic lockdown. In general, accessing gender-affirming healthcare, especially by TGD people in poor and rural communities, is accompanied by excessive financial expenses and lengthy public commutes to and from hospitals. Collison (2020) quotes Regerlee Letsapa, a transwoman from Galeshewe in the Northern Cape Province who has been on Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) for a year said:

Before I was on hormones... I couldn't come to terms with who I am. Things were not going well with myself (*sic*). I didn't know what to do. I was even considering suicide. But in the end I did make a turnaround and told myself I need to seek help. So I went to the psychologists here in Kimberley I could get help from [and they] referred me to an endocrinologist at Bloemfontein Universitas Hospital.

Letsapa, who was supposed to obtain her prescription at her appointment in the first week of May, had to deal with the reality that it was rescheduled for September 2020. The postponement of Letsapa's HRT compromised her holistic well-being and basic human rights to have access to healthcare. The inaccessibility of the healthcare system by TGD persons is an ongoing struggle, as multiple forms of violence hinder TGD persons from obtaining gender affirming healthcare from the medical and allied health sectors.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, intersex persons in the South African healthcare system are not immune to Intersex Genetical Mutilation (IGM) practices that "conceal the intersex body"<sup>31</sup> to fit into the binary sex and gender categories. In other cases, infanticide plays a role because of cultural beliefs that "intersex infants are 'bad omens,' a sign of witchcraft, a punishment from God and a curse on the family they are born

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<sup>29</sup> Koopman, *Racism*, 161.

<sup>30</sup> Christine McLachlan, "Que(e)ring Trans and Gender Diversity," *South African Journal of Psychology* 49/1 (2019): 10–13.

<sup>31</sup> National Intersex Meeting Report, (2018), 19

into”.<sup>32</sup> The combined effect of the lockdown regulations and re-allocation of health resources impacted the well-being of Trans, gender non-conforming and intersex persons in South Africa more adversely due to added stigma and discrimination. South Africa’s healthcare system often discriminates against and violates the rights of TGD bodies and privileges cisgender bodies.

Human Rights Watch reported that the COVID19 pandemic insecurities and vulnerabilities were not only experienced by South Africans but also by LGBTIQ + refugees and asylum seekers:

Victor Chikalogwe, director of the LGBT refugee advocacy group People Against Suffering, Suppression, Oppression, and Poverty (PASSOP), has said that the lockdown has made life incredibly difficult for many undocumented LGBT migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, as they are unable to work in the informal trades that have sustained them, including restaurants, bars, or sex work. They are not eligible to receive government social grants or food parcels, which are distributed only to those with South African identity cards and Social Security cards.<sup>33</sup>

The South African government therefore failed structurally to protect and promote the universal human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants. As argued by in terms of racism, heteropatriarchy not only manifests psychologically and structurally but also in religious discourse and practices.<sup>34</sup>

## **2 Religious Heteropatriarchy**

Violence is not only experienced structurally in society and culture or in the medical sector. Religious communities in South Africa play a significant role in maintaining heteropatriarchy and faith is often used to do violence to LGBTIQ+ bodies, as argued by.<sup>35</sup> Sanctioned heteropatriarchy is based on how the Bible is read and interpreted. Rather than functioning as a conversation starter, the Bible or Sacred Scriptures often functions as a proverbial dead end to creative and imaginative explorations of realities constituted by gender and sexual diversity. Van der Walt argues that heteropatriarchy is often informed by exclusivist practices of Bible interpretation and finds expression in proof texts that often

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<sup>32</sup> National Intersex Meeting Report, (2018), 19

<sup>33</sup> South Africa: End Bias in COVID 19 Food Aid [Online]. [n.d]. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/20/south-africa-end-bias-COVID19-food-aid> . Access Date: 6 June 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Koopman, *Racism*, 157–159.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald O. West, Charlene Van der Walt and Kapyia John Kaoma, “When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa,” *HTS Theological Studies* 72/1 (2016): 8.

lead to exclusion, discrimination and violence.<sup>36</sup> These texts, which are read and interpreted literally, include but are not limited to Gen 1–3, Gen 19, Judg 19, Lev 18:22; 20:13, Rom 1: 26–27, 1 Cor 6: 9–10 and 1 Tim 1:10.<sup>37</sup> In this view, Gen 1–3 stipulates how heterosexuality and gender complementarity are ordained by God.<sup>38</sup> LGBTIQ+ people whose sex, gender and sexuality differ fundamentally from this view are deemed “abnormal” and experience death and not life.<sup>39</sup> Life denying biblical interpretation does not only inform preaching but finds expression in the practices (liturgy, mission and pastoral care) of faith communities.

Considering the pervasive influence of heteropatriarchy as an ideology, it is not surprising that LGBTIQ+ people bore the brunt of the global pandemic as God’s wrath and punishment. Oscar Bougardt a Cape Town Christian pastor blamed government legislation of same-sex marriages and mocked same-sex couples for not being able to procreate during the initial twenty-one-day national lockdown in South Africa. The heteropatriarchal blame game of which Bougardt is complicit is a manifestation of ideological imagery. Bougardt is therefore a symbol of conscious and unconscious behavioural formation of societal, cultural, and religious norms and beliefs that strive towards discriminatory meaning making process justify the outbreak of the pandemic and to blame it on LGBTIQ+ bodies.

## C CBS AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

Although, as argued above, religion and biblical interpretation profoundly form part of the strands of oppression impacting the lives of LGBTIQ+ in the African context, we are also deeply aware of the liberating potential that responsible and accountable Bible engagement and religious communities of care hold for the poor and marginalised.<sup>40</sup> As hinted at above, often when engaging issues of

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<sup>36</sup> 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, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Hanzline R. Davids, and Chris Jones. “Theological-ethical Contours for the Full Inclusion of LGBTIQ+ Bodies in the Church” in *Justice-based Ethics: Challenging South African Perspectives* (ed. C. Jones; Cape Town: AOSIS, 2018), 89–117, 97–99; <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2018.BK77.04>.

<sup>38</sup> Lovemore Togarasei and Ezra Chitando, “‘Beyond the Bible’: Critical Reflections on the Contributions of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies on Same-Sex Relationships in Africa,” *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 17/2 (2011): 109–125, 110–114; Davids and Jones, “Theological-ethical Contours,” 92–93.

<sup>39</sup> Davids and Jones, “Theological-ethical Contours,” 92.

<sup>40</sup> For more regarding a responsible ethic of Bible interpretation and reflections on being accountable to interpretative communities, see Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 107/1 (1988): 3–17; Gerald O. West, “The Vocation of an African Biblical Scholar on the Margins of Biblical Scholarship,” *OTE* 19/1 (2006): 307–336.



gender and sexuality, the Bible is employed as an external source document that somehow contains answers or rules and prescriptions informing correct ethical behaviour and contemporary conduct. This approach not only ignores the contextual lived reality of contemporary interpreters, but also makes light of the contextual gap between the world of and behind the text and the complex reality interpreters currently face. Informed by foundational insights from Latin American Liberation Theology and underpinnings from feminist theory, Contextual Bible Study, as a methodology, appropriates a deeply contextual See-Judge-Act approach.

## **1 Starting from the embodied lived reality of the poor and marginalised**

The lived reality of a particular marginalised community or population, as understood by the members themselves, is the starting point of the first ‘See’ moment of the praxis cycle. The approach takes seriously the embodied contextual lived reality of those often deliberately silenced or preferably those who are unheard.<sup>41</sup> After an in-depth contextual engagement, the praxis cycle moves on to the ‘judge’ moment where interpretative communities slowly and deliberately engage with the biblical text. This phase draws on insights from biblical scholarship by using both literary-narrative and socio-historical modes of analysis to identify and read with marginalised ‘voices’ in, under, above and behind biblical texts. These ancient biblical voices become the dialogue partners for contemporary marginalised communities, as the text functions as a dynamic reflective surface.<sup>42</sup> Safe spaces, or rather brave spaces, are constructed with care to facilitate a dynamic engagement where the first reality of life is brought into dialogue with the second reality of biblical texts. Fundamentally, the first two movements of the praxis cycle are aimed at empowering communities to ‘act’

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<sup>41</sup> 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 preferably refuses 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. For a full version of the speech, see the Sydney Morning Herald: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/roys-full-speech-20041104-gdk1qn.html>

<sup>42</sup> For more on how the functions of the Bible as a reflective surface in the process of Contextual Bible Study, 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. Juliana L. Claassens and Bruce C. Birch; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publisher, 2015), 57–74. Charlene Van der Walt and Judith Terblanche, “Reimagining a Solitary Landscape: Tracing Communities of Care in Exodus 1–2 and the Film Shirley Adams,” *OTE* 29/1 (2016): 176–194. Van der Walt, Charlene. “‘To the Wonder.’ Finding God in the Most Unexpected Places,” in *Considering Compassion: Global Ethics, Human Dignity, and the Compassionate God* (ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Frits de Lange. Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), 170-186.

collaboratively and with imagination in engaging situations of injustice, marginalisation and violence.

## 2 Smashing the silos by working together across sectors

This approach has been fruitfully and impactfully employed and developed by the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research<sup>43</sup> in the last 33 years, as it engaged in numerous thematic areas and vulnerable populations including survivors of Gender Based Violence,<sup>44</sup> communities living with HIV and Aids,<sup>45</sup> Men and Masculinity,<sup>46</sup> communities impacted by dehumanising socio-economic realities<sup>47</sup> and, most recently, the LGBTIQ+ community.<sup>48</sup> The methodology and resources developed by the Ujamaa Centre has been appropriated, developed and adapted by partners based in both the civil society and the faith landscape and this is a reality encouraged by the Ujamaa Centre. When considering ongoing work in the field of LGBTIQ+ and faith, the *Reading Together* toolkit developed by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries<sup>49</sup> (IAM) that draws from Intercultural and Contextual Bible reading insights, combined with IAM’s theory of change, opens hearts (diversity awareness, minds (anti-bias trainings and doors (inclusive and affirming faith communities). Considering the contextual realities faced by LGBTIQ+ people in the African landscape as

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<sup>43</sup> The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research is hosted by the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. For more on the Centre, see <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx>.

<sup>44</sup> See Gerald West, P. Zondi-Mabizela, M. Maluleke, H. Khumalo, P.S. Matsepe and M. Naidoo, “Rape in the House of David: The Biblical Story of Tamar as a Resource for Transformation,” *Agenda* 18/61 (2004): 36–41. Gerald 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). 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.

<sup>45</sup> See Gerald O. West and Bongzi Zengele. “The Medicine of God’s Word: What People Living with HIV and AIDS Want (and Get) from the Bible,” *JTSA* 125 (2006): 51.

<sup>46</sup> See Gerald, O. West, “Exegesis Seeking Appropriation; Appropriation Seeking Exegesis: Re-reading 2 Samuel 13: 1–22 in Search of Redemptive Masculinities,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/2 (2013): 1–6.

<sup>47</sup> See Gerald O. West, “Facilitating Interpretive Resilience: The Joseph Story (Genesis 37–50) as a Site of Struggle,” *Acta Theologica* 38 (2018): 17–37.

<sup>48</sup> See Gerald O. West, Charlene van der Walt and K.J. Kaoma. “When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa,” *HTS Theological Studies* 72/1 (2016): 1–8. Gerald. O. West, and Charlene van der Walt, “A Queer (Beginning to the) Bible,” *Concilium* 5 (2019): 109–118.

<sup>49</sup> For more on Inclusive and Affirming Ministries and their theory of change, see <https://iam.org.za/>

outlined above and the urgent need for the development of faith and Contextual Bible Study resources in the intersection of gender, sexual diversity and faith, the Ujamaa Centre and the Gender and Religion program at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and (IAM) joined forces at the beginning of January 2020. Although there has been a productive and fruitful history of collaboration between the organisations, the intensive Gender and Sexual Diversity Contextual Bible Study resource development workshop sharpened the focus of collaboration. The workshop aimed at developing specific resources that could assist faith communities, clergy, LGBTIQ+ people, family and friends to grapple with the biblical text in a contextual way when engaging issues of gender and sexuality. The intensive workshop firstly reflected on the theoretical underpinnings of Contextual Bible Study and how these insights could be appropriated and translated to empower LGBTIQ+ believers and faith communities when interpreting the biblical text. Genesis 1 and 2, Gen 18 and 19, Gen 37 and Acts 8 were selected as the first round of focus texts, as these texts not only offer important reflective surfaces to engage issues of gender and sexuality, but resources could be developed to spark important contextual conversations for very different interpretative communities ranging from hostile faith communities to allies and LGBTIQ+ people grappling with the Bible.

In the final part of the essay, we will offer some preliminary reflections on an ongoing engagement with the Joseph narrative from an LGBTIQ+ perspective which appropriates insights from queer biblical scholarship.<sup>50</sup> Although the Joseph narrative cycle in Gen 37-50 consists of a number of important episodes that could be used to develop potential Contextual Bible Study resources, we decided to focus on the introductory episode in Gen 37 to develop a CBS resource that could be appropriated by LGBTIQ+ people of faith, as they navigate othering, stigmatisation and violence, as outlined above.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The current work being developed by the Ujamaa Centre in collaboration with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries stands in a long tradition of Contextual Bible Study work done by appropriating the Joseph narrative cycle. For more in this regard, see Gerald O. West, "Facilitating Interpretive Resilience: The Joseph Story (Genesis 37–50) as a Site of Struggle," *Acta Theologica* 38 (2018): 17–37.

<sup>51</sup> The Ujamaa Centre is in the process of developing a sequence of Contextual Bible Studies in order to engage the intersection of gender, sexuality and religion by making use of the Joseph narrative cycle. Beyond the CBS resources that is available for download from our website we are also involved in continued research dissemination of our praxis reflection work for various publications. Further reflection on the Genesis 37 Bible Studies has also been submitted for publication in a special volume that is currently in production celebrating 25 years of the Bridging Gaps program at the Free University of Amsterdam. The essay submitted for this contribution is entitled: "I won't behave myself. I won't hate myself. Harnessing the multi-coloured butterfly in Genesis 37 as an Iztabane icon."

## D RECLAIMING JOSEPH AS AN *IZITABANE* ICON

Considering much of what has been discussed above, the Bible is often understood by LGBTIQ+ people as the property of either the church or the academy—to be overseen by faith leaders and scholars. Virginia Mollenkott aptly describes this positionality when stating that as a lesbian woman she reads the text from “[be]low and outside.”<sup>52</sup> Drawing from the insights of Queer Biblical Hermeneutics,<sup>53</sup> we aim to trouble the stability of often life-denying hermeneutical practices that exclude LGBTIQ+ people or are used foundationally to incite hate crimes and violence.

For this purpose, we turn our ‘trouble-making’ attention to the richly complex Joseph narrative cycle in the book of Genesis. Joseph is a well-known and eagerly appropriated character in the African context—favourite son of the favourite wife, dreamer, slave and, finally, imperial overlord.<sup>54</sup> 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 we found the narrative to be an ideal reflective surface for the development of a Contextual Bible Study that could function as an interpretative resource.

In the discussion that follows, we aim to illustrate how insights from critical biblical scholarship translate into Contextual Bible Study questions and how we appropriate these learnings in the development and implementation of reading groups with LGBTIQ+ people. A Contextual Bible Study never reaches

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<sup>52</sup> Virginia R. Mollenkott, “Reading the Bible from Low and Outside: Lesbitransgay People as God’s Tricksters” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (eds. Robert E. Goss and Mona West; Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 13–22.

<sup>53</sup> Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, “Already Queer: A Preface” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011): ix. explain that the aim of queer Biblical hermeneutics is to ‘trouble the text’ for the purposes of gaining new insight against normative interpretations. Generally, according to Jeremy Punt, Queer Biblical Hermeneutics is an extremely diverse and non-conformist way of looking at the Bible which goes beyond the familiar heteronormative ways in which the Bible is read. Jeremy Punt, “Intersections in Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory, and Hermeneutical Spin-Offs,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4/2 (2011): 1–16, Hornsby and Stone, also note that Queer Biblical Hermeneutics has been viewed as “experimental” and is a recent phenomenon. Hornsby and Stone, “Already Queer,” ix. Deryn Guest states that it encompasses “other,” non-conventional, ways of reading the Bible, while also attempting to uncover “other” modes of sexual and gender configurations in the pages of the Bible. Deryn Guest, “From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011): 21, 32–36.

<sup>54</sup> Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016), 410–420.

a final version but questions are tweaked and developed; and we hope to illustrate something of the ongoing nature of this work. After the initial development of the Bible study in January, we have had the privilege to test the Bible study in two very rich and diverse settings. On Wednesday, 26th February 2020, the Ujamaa, Gender and Religion Program and IAM collective partnered with the Gay and Lesbian Network in Pietermaritzburg to host a three-hour Contextual Bible Study of the Joseph story. After the very positive first trail-run implementation of the Bible study and due to the increased vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ people during the COVID 19 inspired lockdown, we hosted a second virtual Contextual Bible Study on Wednesday 22nd April. Joseph’s ‘queer’ vulnerability was highlighted and appropriated as a collective resource to enable resilience and hope during the time of COVID 19. Queer participants and concerned faith leaders tuned in from KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, North West and the Western Cape provinces of South Africa.<sup>55</sup>

In the development of the Contextual Bible Study, we found the work of the queer drama scholar Peterson Toscano exceptionally helpful in intersecting religio-cultural and socio-economic issues with gender and sexuality.<sup>56</sup> Toscano picks up on Joseph’s gender non-conforming character in one of his performance lectures and we initially drew from this creative work in order to reflect on Joseph, the indoorsy and dreamy favourite son, as an example of a character who transgresses gender norms in the Bible and one who does not adhere to prescribed gender constructions or expectations.

As is often the case, we started our Contextual Bible study with a dramatic reading of the text and in the process, we try to set up a playful engagement with the characters in the Joseph narrative. The characters and intricate dynamics of the story come to life when different participants take part in the impromptu dramatisation of the story. We found this to be a productive methodology in the sense that it helps readers to enter the text in a unique way and to destabilise formal notions of Bible engagement and, hopefully, in the process, this cracks open a space for more creative conversations.

We will limit the discussion to three short examples of the inherent queerness of the narrative and how this is translated into Contextual Bible Reading Questions that in turn allow for impactful contextual engagements. Although not an exhaustive engagement with the Contextual Bible Study questions or themes engaged with, the study aims to reflect on three interrelated thematic areas that are of specific importance to the intersectional vulnerability experienced by LGBTIQ+ people during the time of COVID 19 namely othering, punitive violence with the aim to correct or normalise and the construction of counter communities of care. Firstly, we turn our attention to the way in which

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<sup>55</sup> For more on the virtual Contextual Bible Study, see <https://srpc.ukzn.ac.za/news/2020/05/ukzn-hosts-lgbti-virtual-contextual-bible-study/>.

<sup>56</sup> For more on Toscano’s work, see <https://petersontoscano.com/>.

Joseph is set apart in the narrative. The fact that Jacob gives Joseph a gift of a coat of many colours is probably remarkable in itself, but that this garment, which has the clear function of an identity marker, is described by the same word that is used to describe Tamar’s dress, fit for a princess, in 2 Sam 13, opens an array of queer interpretative possibilities. Jacob gives Joseph a princess dress and in the process the outsider is colourfully othered. Joseph however is set apart not only because of his dress, but also because of his dreams and the uncensored way in which he flaunts these visions in front of his extended family. We pick up on these dimensions by asking the following sequence of questions:

- Joseph is clearly set apart in this story. What contributes to his otherness?
- Joseph is given 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 Sam 13: 18b and 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 it evoke amongst the brothers?
- Read verses 5–10 again. Besides being set apart because of his dress he is also described in the story as dreamer.
  - What is the effect of Joseph’s dreams on his family?

Joseph’s otherness and visible difference find strong resonance with many *Izitabane* interpreters of the text who often find themselves being othered because of tangible non-conforming gender expressions.

Secondly, Joseph’s distinctly marked otherness, which is amplified by the princess dress, evokes punitive reaction from his brothers. They see him from afar and are affronted by his display of otherness as he comes to visit them in the field. Their physical disciplinary action to 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 participants through the following sequence of questions:

- Jacob sends Joseph to his brothers where they are tending the flock in the field? What emotions are evoked when they see him coming from afar and why?
- Read verses 18–24 together. How does Joseph’s brothers respond to his embodied difference?
- Read again verses 10–13. What do you think informed Jacob’s decision to send Joseph to his brothers in the field?
- In the light of the discussion above, think about your own lived experience.

- Have you experienced situations where your otherness made you vulnerable or where your identity has been questioned?

This painful and dramatic moment in the Joseph narrative cycle functions as a dynamic 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 question aims at assisting readers to reflect on Jacob’s positionality and responsibility when it comes to the punitive violence committed by the brothers to ‘correct’ Joseph. The complexity of the family dynamic gave LGBTIQ+ interpreters the opportunity to reflect amongst themselves on their own experiences of vulnerability and violence, also within their family contexts, during the COVID19 pandemic. The possibility for this in-depth reflection is largely made possible through the appropriation of classic Contextual Bible Reading approach when the last question of the sequence facilitates the move from textual reflections to reflections drawing from contextual and embodied experiences.

As a final theme, we turn to another dimension in the text that could help to spark hope. A third sequence of questions aims at enabling further reflections on experiences of violence and exclusion within familiar family contexts, but then directs the discussion to the possibility of creating counter communities of care.

- Read again verses 25–35. How do the people closest to Joseph respond to the events that transpire here?
- What has your experience been of family in times of vulnerability? What constitutes family to you?
- From Joseph’s experiences of trauma and vulnerably grows a tale of redemption for all sons of Israel (Gen 42:6 to Gen 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?

As is often the case within Contextual Bible Reading approach, the final arc of questions aims at empowering readers to reflect on how they would concretely and contextually respond to the questions after having gone through the process of collective text engagement. Although the Contextual Bible Reading community created has the very specific goal of enabling the communal reading experience, even these fleeting moments of connection hold transformative possibilities for those who are particularly vulnerable due to COVID19. The importance of counter communities of care, however fleeting or virtual, is highlighted as a resource for *Izitabane* to resist normalisation, correction, and annihilation when the Biblical text is used in a life-denying manner.

## E CONCLUSION

We started this contribution with a reflection on the systemic realities underpinned by the pervasive ideology of heteropatriarchy. The foundational ideology combines heteronormativity and patriarchy and informs dominant normative constructions of gender, sexuality and relationality. Those who find themselves embodied outside the confines of the heteronormative script often experience attempts at correction that vary from name calling and being made fun of to violent annihilation. African *Izitabane* people who express gender and sexuality outside the heteropatriarchal norm are particularly vulnerable to exclusion, victimisation and violence. As we have argued, these realities are further compounded by the COVID19 pandemic. Rather than being spaces of safety, care and hospitality, faith institutions often contribute to the stigmatisation and violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ people in the African context. The Bible is frequently and pervasively used as a tool to exclude *Izitabane* believers from the church as a community of care, celebration and support. Further, it is often cited as a source document that incites hate and violence against LGBTIQ+ people in the African context. In an attempt to engage with the contextual and embodied pain and violence that these life-denying interpretative strategies produce, Contextual Bible Study was employed as a tool to assist in the development of interpretative resources for *Izitabane* believers to enhance resilience and to spark hope. In line with the imperative of Queer Biblical Hermeneutics, the essay aimed at illustrating the potential for change when the tool of the master is used against the master. Considering the compounded vulnerability of *Izitabane* people especially when bearing the brunt of the collective disorientation, loss and despair because of COVID19 realities, the importance of life-affirming interpretive resources and counter communities of care cannot be over accentuated.

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