


# Contextual Bible reading and intercultural Bible reading: Four Colombian experiences

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Contextual Bible Reading (CBR) and Intercultural Bible Reading (IBR) have enabled the cooperation between socially engaged scholars and marginalised groups to find new resources in biblical texts to interpret their contexts and fight against the surrounding violence. As the use of these two methods has not been the object of a comparative study based on concrete experiences, this article presents them through four cases of Christian communities in Colombia. This comparative study not only illustrates the differences between these two methods of Bible reading, but also shows how they open new hermeneutic and liberation perspectives in the struggle for social justice and the search for reconciliation. The article depicts the CBR of the story of the Levite's concubine (Jdg 19:1–30) by a group of women living in vulnerable conditions as well as the CBR of the parable of the father and his two sons (Lk 15:11–32) by a group of violence victims' relatives. It also depicts the IBR of the story of the widow and the judge (Lk 18:1–8) by four groups of Caribbean readers as well as the IBR of the garden story (Gn 2:4b–25) by two Andean indigenous groups. Ordinary readers' central role as interpreters of biblical texts let them recognise their own capabilities to transform their contexts in an emancipatory way and challenge biblical scholars and theologians. Even though CBR and IBR pursue different hermeneutical goals, they converge in giving a central role to the community as the subject of counter-hegemonic interpretations that open new horizons starting from reality and triggering liberation processes.

**Contribution:** Beyond their differences and tensions, CBR and IBR are inclusive and dialogical methods intended for liberation that should be used to transcend the limits of dominant interpretations of biblical texts as well as the isolation of marginalised ordinary readers.

**Keywords:** contextual Bible reading; intercultural Bible reading; ordinary readers; Hermeneutics; liberation; vulnerability; violence; Colombia.

## Introduction

Colombian society is characterised by a high social inequality associated with a long-term armed conflict (CHCV 2015). In Colombia, many people live in vulnerable conditions and suffer different kinds of violence. The concept of vulnerability combines the risk factors faced by agents and their means to deal with them (Demény 2016:183). Gender, ethnicity, health condition as well as geographical location are some relevant features that can threaten human dignity and demand resources such as an adequate income, a safe environment, public facilities, medical care, education services and other resources to handle them in terms of a reasonable quality of life. Amongst other forms, violence can be direct, structural or cultural (Galtung & Fischer 2013). Direct violence is evident in killing, maiming, torture, harassment, rape, siege, displacement, repression, and other acts against life, integrity or well-being; whilst structural violence is related to avoidable facts such as exploitation, segregation, marginalisation, poverty, morbidity, alienation, and other silent practices against real freedom or basic needs satisfaction. Cultural violence refers to language, religion, ideology, and any other symbolic system used to legitimise direct or structural violence showing them as right or not wrong (Galtung 1990). The four cases presented in this study are worthy attempts to overcome vulnerability and violence through communitarian Bible reading oriented to transformative action. The author participated directly by working with the communities in the first three described experiences and had privileged access to the last experience communities' reports.

People's Reading of the Bible (PRB) is a method of communitarian Bible reading used in a liberation perspective by Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) since the second half of the 20th century. In Colombia, there is an important tradition in the use of the PRB method in urban areas (Navia 2016:79–83; Torres 2015:296–307) and country contexts (Cañaveral 2012:37–39; De la Torre 2002:56–57). In the last two decades, there have been some local endeavours to link the scholar

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reflection to the wisdom of PRB which nourishes the prophetic nature of Contextual Bible Reading (CBR) and provides important empirical material to Intercultural Bible Reading (IBR) for its reflection and interchange. The four cases reported here are not unique in the effort to connect the academic interpretation of biblical narratives with PRB, but illustrate the differences and connections between CBR and IBR effectively.

A recent study about the reading of the unforgiving debtor story (Mt 18:21–35) by eight Colombian groups of internally displaced victims used PRB to enrich scholar's interpretation of the text (Heimburger, Hays & Mejía-Castillo 2019). This could be an example of how 'ordinary readers remain mere informants for the professional exegetes' (Loba-Mkole 2021:3). A more recent doctoral dissertation (Pacheco 2020) showed how the peasants of *El Garzal*, a community engaged in a legal fight for its rights against expropriation of land, read the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Ki 21:1–19) and some other biblical narratives using the PRB to reflect on reconciliation. This could be an example of how ordinary readers are positioned as 'fields of application' (Loba-Mkole 2021:3).

The originality of this comparative study is to consider four concrete cases in Colombia to illustrate how, being centred in communities as subjects of interpretation, CBR and IBR link the academic interpretation of biblical narratives with ordinary readers' interpretation. Whilst CBR is presented as a form of liberation hermeneutics (West 2014), IBR rather appears as an empirical hermeneutics (De Wit 2012). The study shows how beyond differences and tensions both methods are inclusive, dialogical and intended for liberation.

The article describes the two methods and illustrates them by the experiences of different Christian grassroots communities that have worked in cooperation with some scholars of the Faculty of Theology at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana over the last 15 years. One group used CBR to read the story of the Levite's concubine (Jdg 19:1–30), whilst a different group used the same method to read the parable of the father and his two sons (Lk 15:11–32). Four Caribbean groups used IBR to read the story of the widow and the judge (Lk 18:1–8) and two Andean groups used the same method to read the story of the garden (Gn 2:4b–25). These cases evidence how both methods open new hermeneutic and liberation perspectives in the struggle for social justice and the search for reconciliation.

## Methods and cases

### Contextual Bible Reading

Even though any interpretation of a biblical text is contextual in a broad sense, the CBR as a specific method comes from the importance given by Latin American liberation theology to the relationship between praxis and interpretation (Croatto 1994), as well as the need of South African liberation theology to resist the apartheid's theology in the 1980s (West 2014). Amongst other situational theologies, the CBR and the concrete practice of it through the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) are expressions of liberation hermeneutics (West 2014):

Contextual Bible Study is a form of liberation hermeneutics that emerged in South Africa. In it, socially engaged biblical scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible collaborate in the interpretive process. The interpretive process follows the contours of the See-Judge-Act method, moving from social analysis to biblical reflection to social action. (p. 2)

The collaborative work between academy and grassroots communities, especially those conformed by exploited and marginalised people, allows the dialogue between trained readers and ordinary readers starting from the adverse conditions that poor and despised groups live in. The ultimate goal of CBR is not to know more about the reality or the Bible, but to transform contexts. That means to give an epistemological priority to the non-scholar participants in the interpretation of their own reality (Dreher 2004:17) and even of the Scripture (Mesters 1983:28). The CBR and the CBS practice, as a particular form of it, not only privilege the context of the poor and marginalised, but also privilege their 'knowledge systems with respect to their context and the Bible' (West 2014:3).

Beyond the ethical option of social engagement, one of the main challenges for scholars involved in the communal struggles is to recognise 'the value and legitimacy of the theology emerged from the grassroots communities' assessment of their reality in the light of the Word' (López 2019:84). As far as CBS is under control of the community, it is a safe place where ordinary readers can speak freely starting from their own knowledge, which is the basis of the interpretative process, overcoming alienating ideological analysis, dominant readings of biblical texts as well as oppressive religious and theological discourses.

A CBR process covers three stages going from the community to the biblical texts, deepening on them, and coming back from the biblical texts to the community. It starts by asking the community about the realities of its context to depict real life from below and make evident the participants' perception of their situation. Then the community brings the Scripture into dialogue with these realities starting from its previous knowledge of biblical texts and comparing different available versions of them. Through generative questions (Freire & Faundez 1998), literary-semiotic and thematic-metaphoric approaches to biblical texts open up the space for ordinary readers to socio-historical analysis (West 2014). Finally, after reading biblical texts in a careful and redemptive way, the community is encouraged to recognise its own resources to transform the context and starts working on it.

Facilitators must consider how besides symbolic resources of the liturgical atmosphere, singing, poetry, drawing and drama, amongst other actions, help the CBS participants to start this threefold movement 'from the in-front-of-the-text dimensions to the on-the-text dimensions to the behind-the-text dimensions and then back to the in-front-of-the-text dimensions' (West 2014:5). It is imperative to design in advance some literary-narrative questions to slow down the reading of the text and in the process prepare the community

to answer socio-historical-questions in a prophetic way. Trained readers can help the community with some of their technical knowledge about linguistic, structural or historical aspects of the texts, but should keep in mind that ordinary readers, even the illiterate people, also bring critical resources useful to grasp the message of biblical texts (West 2002).

Between 2015 and 2016, in the framework of a Participatory Action Research<sup>1</sup> project, the rape of Princess Tamar narrated in 2 Samuel 13:1–22 was read by a group of women living with HIV using the CBR method (López 2017b, 2018). This project represented a valuable learning experience for some Colombian scholars who had previously participated in a training workshop with experts from the Centro de Estudios Bíblicos (CEBI)<sup>2</sup> and the Ujamaa Centre<sup>3</sup> (West 2015:235). Along with the CBR of 2 Samuel 13:1–22, the next two cases show how CBR processes can imply extended routes beyond a single session dedicated to develop just only one CBS.

### **The rape and assassination of the Levite's concubine (Jdg 19:1–30) read by a group of women in vulnerable conditions**

As in other Latin American countries, the vulnerability in Colombia is particularly critical in the case of women. This condition is evident in their narrow access to formal employment and the low wages they receive/reach compared to men. Gender inequality is also visible in the feminisation of poverty as well as in the rates of sexual violence and other forms of direct violence against women, frequently perpetrated by their own partners or relatives (DANE, CPEM & ONU 2020).

Sexual exploitation of women through prostitution is a structured form of broadly tolerated violence which has increased in Colombia as an effect of the armed conflict, the internal forced displacement, and the migratory flow from Venezuela. Some organisations fight to rescue women from prostitution by giving them alternatives to survive and overcome the need to perform sexual activities for payment. A point in case is the *Adoratrices* Program which through the *Miquelina* Foundation, a sewing factory located in the Bogotá Southeast area, offers education and employment opportunities to sexually exploited women and other women in vulnerable conditions.

Between 2017 and 2018, a group of social leaders of the *Adoratrices* Program, most of them survivors of prostitution and human trafficking, read the story of the Levite's concubine (Jdg 19:1–30) with the participation of some Javeriana scholars. These women found important common elements between the narrative and their life experiences such as the effects of men's decisions on women's lives, the

1. Participatory Action Research also shares the logics of the See-Judge-Act method.

2. The Centro de Estudios Bíblicos has been promoting the PRB in Brazil and in other Latin American countries since the 1980s. Its model has been a main reference for The Ujamaa Centre.

3. The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research at KwaZulu-Natal University has developed the CBS in South Africa and has spread this practice over other countries in Africa and Europe.

function of rape in armed conflicts, the kidnapping of women as sexual objects by armed groups, and the violence against women inflicted by their own partners at home.

The Septuagint version, at the beginning of the story (19:2), explains that the nameless and voiceless woman left the Levite's house simply because she became angry with him [καὶ ὠργίσθη αὐτῷ ἢ παλλακὴ αὐτοῦ], whilst the Masoretic Text version indicates that she was unfaithful to her husband [וַיִּזְנֶה הַיְהוָה]. An alternative translation of the second version suggests that it was the very Levite who prostituted her (Reis 2006:129), and this could be a key that does make sense considering that the Levite did not reject her and the girl's father received her at home. Amongst the different available versions of the text read by the group of *Adoratrices* participants, this last translation was very significant for these social leaders, who stressed the fact that the scorned Levite went to her father's house looking for the girl to recover and kill her as it happens in many real cases of enslaved women searching for autonomy. This is a counter-hegemonic interpretation against some readings that could be used to justify the punishment inflicted on unfaithful wives and that emerged in the first meetings when the scholars proposed the text to the group.

After five CBS sessions and looking how the story ends in the same place where it begins (19:29), the group identified the need to prevent recidivism because even after big efforts done by the program some vulnerable women go back to prostitution, an activity frequently associated with alcohol and drug abuse. This long-term action, which implies the strengthening of familiar, labour and social ties, is now on the horizon of this group of social leaders.

At the end of 2017, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the *Miquelina* Foundation, the group of female readers organised a local conference in cooperation with the participant scholars. The conference 'Prostitution: Their affair or everybody's affair?' was hosted on November 1 by the Universidad Javeriana and it was attended by more than 200 people, including local authorities. It was an extraordinary opportunity to listen to the experiences of some women from the *Adoratrices* Program who consider prostitution as a contemporary sort of slavery, which is against human rights, and to confront that vision with the experiences of other women who conceive prostitution as a job that the governments have to regulate through employment policies.

### **The story of the father and his two sons (Lk 15:11–32) read by a group of massacre victims' relatives**

To eliminate the presence of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) [National Liberation Army] in the North area of the Department of Valle del Cauca, during the counterinsurgency war at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, some members of the National Police and the Colombian Army established an alliance with criminal drug trafficking groups. These armed actors unleashed a systematic practice of disappearances and

assassinations in the region. Around 400 inhabitants from Trujillo village and its surrounding country area, being accused of collaboration with the ELN guerrilla, were killed after suffering torture (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011).

Since 1995, the relatives of the victims of the Trujillo massacre have struggled for justice, truth, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition. One of the organisations of victims of this massacre is the Asociación de Familiares de las Víctimas de la Masacre de Trujillo (AFAVIT) [Association of Relatives of the Trujillo Massacre Victims]. After a series of biblical workshops about reconciliation carried out between 2012 and 2015, the community decided to read the story of the father and his two sons (Lk 15:11–32) with the participation of some Javeriana scholars between 2017 and 2019.

The political polarisation because of the negotiation process between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] guerrilla was the framework of a series of five CBS sessions. In terms of the biblical story, a part of Colombian society had assumed the attitude of the elder son towards the demobilisation of the combatants and their insertion into democratic life. Through CBR, the situation of the country was reflected in the contrast between the compassion of the father [ἐσπλαγγίσθη] who forgave the fault committed by his younger son and celebrated his return (15:22–24) and the anger of the elder son [ὠργίσθη δέ] who believing himself to be always just refused to celebrate his brother's return to the family life (15:28–30).

To overcome the dominant reading of the narrative misnamed 'The prodigal son' (15:13) which emphasises the faults of the younger son, the three first CBS sessions helped to see the story from the perspectives of the three main characters and to establish the relations between them. Two more CBS sessions were dedicated to analyse the relationship of this tale with the other two stories (15:4–10), told by Jesus to the Pharisees and the scribes (15:2), to better understand the function of the parable in Luke's Gospel (Burke 2013) moving from the moral vision of forgiveness to its political concept (López 2014).

Two notions of justice were facing each other in Colombian society, a restorative notion favourable to reconciliation by looking to the future and a punitive notion prone to retaliation by looking to the past (López 2017a). Some drawings created by the participants during the third CBS showed how these two concepts of justice were also present in the AFAVIT community as the elder readers were reluctant to forgive, whilst the younger readers' perspective helped to envision a better future for all.

At the end of the CBS series, the younger members of AFAVIT invited the elder to assume the future perspective and staged the play 'The Bridge of Reconciliation'. This play presents the anonymous story of two brothers who, dealing with a difference between them, hired a carpenter to separate their two plots of land by building a wooden fence. The outcome of

the story reveals how the carpenter decided to build a bridge that connected the brothers' properties, who end up reconciling when they saw the finished work. Furthermore, with the collaboration of the Faculty of Theology, the members of AFAVIT published a booklet (AFAVIT 2018) with five CBSs for the use of groups and communities that will read this narrative from the perspective of forgiveness and reconciliation.

## Intercultural Bible Reading

Otherness is a central category in the IBR method which brings couples of small groups together to share their interpretations of the same biblical text. Reading the Bible 'through the eyes of another' (De Wit 2004:3) broadens the perspective of each group to grasp the meaning by answering together questions like: 'What traces of suffering and of human experience are seen in or behind the text?', 'What traces are now visible in the light of the text?' (De Wit 2012:25).

Along the lines of the Intercultural Construction method, the IBR avoids both a self-centred vision in the intercultural dialogue and the universal pretension of transcultural neutrality (Loba-Mkole 2021:6). Beyond cultural juxtaposition, cultural assimilation and cultural resignation (Loba-Mkole 2021:6), IBR gives priority to the experience of otherness as the environment of the intercultural dialogue.

Contemporary hermeneutics highlights the importance of the other in the endless and transcendent interpretation process, 'as if each person, by his uniqueness, may ensure the revelation of one aspect of the truth... the multiple meanings are of multiple people' (Levinas 1982:163). But there is a lack of empirical evidence about how does otherness work in the practice and IBR aims to fill this gap by intercultural dialogue.

In 2001, diverse groups from more than 25 countries started to practise the IBR method by reading together with their partner groups the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1–42). Since then there have been many other IBR experiences connecting groups from different countries and regions. Over the last 15 years, the Dom Hélder Câmara Chair has sponsored both empirical IBR experiences and theoretical reflection on them (De Wit 2020).

Reading the Bible has a performative effect as a moment of appropriation in which the presence of a concrete other transforms one's perception of the reality and enables the understanding of one another in favour of solidarity and reconciliation. As Levinas states, the potential of meaning in biblical texts has an ethical priority: 'To present the transcendent as the stranger and the poor one is to prohibit the metaphysical relation with God from being accomplished in the ignorance of men and things' (Levinas 2008:76).

The main question for the IBR method is about what happens to biblical texts when they are interpreted by groups of readers and what happens to readers interpreting biblical texts jointly with other readers, 'texts do something with

readers, and readers do something with texts' (De Wit 2012:14). Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) is a very useful tool applied in IBR to know how transformations take place amongst the groups in dialogue and to what extent some groups could be trapped by dominant readings or ideological uses of texts (De Wit 2012).

Participant groups in IBR can come from any cultural or social background, which includes scholars and ordinary readers, as well as violence victims or oppressed and marginalised people. Frequently poor and despised communities are linked to others who are living in similar circumstances in different cultural contexts. Sometimes theologians and biblical scholars participate in the IBR dialogue as a part of a group or facilitating the interchange process amongst groups.

The IBR process covers three phases. Each group starts introducing itself and reading the biblical text separately to get its particular interpretation from its own context and perspective as a collective ordinary reader, then sends to the peer group a verbatim report of the sessions in which the spontaneous reading came up. In the second stage, the groups read the received report reflecting on the similarities and differences to interchange a second verbatim report with their reaction to the first one. Finally, the groups read the second report and react opening up the space for further communication.

Between 2011 and 2012, in coordination with a group of Javeriana scholars, four BECs read the encounter between Mary of Magdala and the Risen Lord (Jn 20:1–18) using the IBR method with four different groups from Perú, Bolivia, Germany and The Netherlands (López 2015).<sup>4</sup>

### **The story of the widow and the judge (Lk 18:1–8) read by Colombian and Salvadorian groups**

People in Tierralta have suffered for many years the violent action of illegal Colombian armed groups disputing the territory. Rural population in the surroundings of the town has been the object of the state's forces repression in favour of big landowners. As in other places of the Colombian Caribbean coast, the right-wing paramilitary forces took the public administration and promoted impunity by manipulating the judicial power.

Between 1999 and 2010, a group of theologians and biblical scholars led a Bible reading training programme for rural communities (PUJ 2009). In 2009, in coordination with these scholars, four Catholic groups of the San José parish interchanged their reading of the widow and the judge story (Lk 18:1–8) with four Salvadorian groups using the IBR method.

The story of the widow, who persistently claimed for justice before an indolent judge [και ἤρχετο πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγουσα· ἐκδίκησόν με ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου] until he finally acceded, is introduced by an excerpt about the importance of continuous praying (18:1)

4. These BECs live in *Las Lomas* [The Hills], a marginalised suburb in the Bogotá Southeast area. Between 2002 and 2003, these BECs also read John 4:1–42 with different groups from India, Germany and The Netherlands using the IBR method, whilst a group of Javeriana scholars interchanged with a group of Brazilian shoemakers (López 2004).

and followed by an eschatological conclusion (18:6–8), both probably added later (Price 1997). The original tale of the widow (18:2–5) is a message of hope to resist injustice and fight against impunity. Gaps in the tale, such as the unmentioned acts against the widow, allow readers to get involved in the narrative through their own experiences of injustice.

In the spontaneous reading, some Colombian and Salvadorian women who had lost their partners or their children by the armed conflict violence identified themselves with the widow's struggle for justice. One of the Colombian groups highlighted the role of the community reading the story from a real widow's experience, 'the community of this district decided to help her and motivate her to keep on fighting' (Third group of rural animators, Saint Joseph Parish, Tierralta. First report, July, 2008). Their peer Salvadorian readers from the Santa Rosa de Lima parish in Cuscatancingo found in the text a clear message to support their collective fight: 'this text tells us that we must try not to leave to the will of others what is rightfully ours... It is necessary to organise ourselves for this defence' (Santa Rosa de Lima Parish, Cuscatancingo. First report, August, 2008).

In the second phase, a group of young readers from the Salvadorian village of Mejicanos detected a spiritualising risk in the interpretation by a group of young Colombian readers:

'...a very strong spiritual nuance is evident, as if spiritualising the biblical text..., saying that is necessary to pray, to fast... Those things make the widow very passive in the story.' (Centro de Formación y Orientación Rafael Palacios, Mejicanos. Second report, April, 2009)

This Salvadorian group was aware of the importance of a critical Bible reading from the common reader's perspective: 'we have to break free from what we have always been told: that the only valuable thoughts are those of scholars or people with power' (Centro de Formación y Orientación Rafael Palacios, Mejicanos. Second report, April, 2009). On the other side, a different risk was perceived by the Colombian readers in the Salvadorian group's interpretation: 'Like you, we also have much impunity in our context, but it seems that you are reading your life in the text, without paying much attention to the text itself' (Catechists Group, Saint Joseph Parish, Tierralta. Second report, April, 2009).

Something similar happened between a group of rural animators and another group of readers from Mejicanos who warned their Colombian peers about the political importance of the narrative:

'I think that many times this text has not been seen the way it is: a political denunciation of the unfair structures in our societies, presented by a common woman.' (Grupo Mártires, Saint Francis Parish, Mejicanos. Second report, August, 2009)

After the interchange, a Colombian participant reported:

'[I]t is true that sometimes I preferred the spiritual reflection, and I gave little importance to social aspects included in our everyday life. That is why I have started to be more like you. Thank you.' (First group of rural animators, Saint Joseph Parish, Tierralta. Third report, December, 2009)

The IBR also opened up the space for solidarity between peer communities: 'we are not alone, we are not the only ones suffering in this situation, but we can get together to achieve a change in the world we live in', expressed a Salvadorian reader at the end (Grupo Mártires, Saint Francis Parish, Mejicanos. Third report, December, 2009). The interchange between these Colombian and Salvadorian groups has continued through the years. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, these groups gathered at the Internet meeting 'Memory, Resistance and Hope' hosted in September 2020 by the Salvadorian Lutheran Synod and the Bartolomé de Las Casas Institute.<sup>5</sup>

### **The story of the garden (Gn 2:4b–25) read by Andean communities from Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia**

Most of the Andean peoples received the Bible by imposition during the Colonial times, but now Christianity is a part of their identity. Even though biblical texts are still used to delegitimise their legacy wisdom, some Christian communities resist recognising the message of life not only in the Bible but also in other sacred Andean fabrics, quipus, drawings, legends, songs and dances oriented to preserve the cosmic harmony (Chipana 2019):

[T]he great challenge is to overcome the understanding of the Bible, as the only foundation of truth, in order to accept the other expressions of the Mystery of life, or the vital force, which is named and felt in a variety of forms. (p. 52)

From this dialogical and decolonial perspective, between 2016 and 2017, a Nasa community read the story of the garden (Gn 2:4b–25) with an Ecuadorian community using the IBR method whilst a Kishú community did the same with a Bolivian Trinitarian community of the Department of Beni. The Nasa and the Kishú Colombian communities live in the rural area of Silvia, in the Northeast area of the Department of Cauca, whilst the Ecuadorian community lives in Quito.

Kishú and Trinitarian languages are in danger because of the disuse amongst new generations, so these two peoples share the struggle for their ancient traditions: 'different cultures but equal in dignity', as a Bolivian participant expressed (Trinitarian Community, San Lorenzo de Moxos. Second report, April, 2017). Even though Nasayuwe and Quichua languages are still used, the other two Andean communities also fight to preserve their ancestral customs in the dialogue with Christianity and other Western traditions. Only the Quito community of the New Jerusalem Church counted with a vernacular language version of the Bible.

In the spontaneous reading of the text, the Bolivian readers noticed how the garden narrative mentions two tasks usually performed by men, to work it and take care of it [לַעֲבֹדָה וְלִשְׁמֹרָה] (2:15), but does not mention other important duties carried out by women. This aspect of the story made them ask: 'Why God made the man first instead of the woman?... Why God did not create the woman first? Or why it was not written like

5. The Bartolomé de Las Casas Institute coordinated the reading process with the Salvadorian groups and the interchange with their Colombian peer groups.

this?' (Trinitarian Community, San Lorenzo de Moxos. First report, November, 2016). At the beginning, Kishú women mentioned their social work for children and sick people. This testimony was appreciated by their Trinitarian peers who saw in 'these very brave women' (Trinitarian Community, San Lorenzo de Moxos. Second report, April, 2017) an example to be followed. In the second phase, the Bolivian readers were amazed to find in the Colombian report that most of the meeting attendees were women and then wondered if Kishú men consider that this was none of their business as they had more important things to do. 'I wish men to get involved, it is better to be together as Adam and Eve were in Eden', expressed a Bolivian participant (Trinitarian Community, San Lorenzo de Moxos. Second report, April, 2017).

In the first phase both Nasa and Ecuadorian communities, which recognised each other in their common practice of hospitality, reported to be reading for the first time a biblical text without the mediation of priests or pastors who explain the message. The young readers of the Quito community wondered about God's intention by planting the good and the evil tree making humanity fall and that suspicion introduced some tension between them and the older Ecuadorian readers. The spontaneous reading of the story also raised the question about gender equity in the Quito community, whose Evangelical tradition makes it difficult to recognise the same dignity emphasising 'the idea that man is woman's head to justify machismo, so the woman has neither voice nor vote' (New Jerusalem Church, Quito. First report, September, 2016). Reading the Ecuadorian report, during the second phase, the Nasa group shared their understanding of the couple and its balanced work 'as a company instead of separation of functions without mutual help' (Nasa Community, Pitayó. Second report, April, 2017).

The strong relationship with nature, especially with water sources, made these four Andean communities think about the harmony of creation and their own traditions: 'God expects from us to take care of our values, culture, language, crops, as well as nature and springs. That we eat the food we grow in our territory' (Kishú Community, Quizgo. First report, September, 2016). At the end, the two Colombian communities expressed their commitment to women's dignity: 'Strengthen the ancestral knowledge of indigenous women, re-signifying what to be a woman means in the recovery of autonomy by a decolonised thinking' (Nasa and Kishú communities, Silvia. Third common report, May, 2018).

This IBR experience was an emancipatory exchange, as the Ecuadorian community expressed to its Colombian partner group at the end:

'[W]e are taking steps to read the Bible more freely. We encourage you too to seek that freedom and not be dominated by imposed readings for centuries, especially on us who come from ancient cultures.' (New Jerusalem Church, Quito. Third report, July, 2017)

## Conclusion

The four cases presented in this comparative study show how both CBR and IBR bring up the liberation meaning potential of biblical texts. Through CBR, women in vulnerable conditions and victims of violence found paths to social justice and reconciliation. The Caribbean communities who were affected by violence as well as the vulnerable Andean communities realised how the IBR dialogue stimulates solidarity in their struggle for justice and freedom.

The central role of communities in both methods lets the ordinary readers explore ways to overcome vulnerability and violence through Bible reading. Critical appropriation of biblical texts by these communities liberates them from dominant readings.

There is a transformative circular movement between reflection and action in both methods. The CBR process starts in the community-consciousness moving to the critical-consciousness and going back to the community-consciousness, once there has been a critical appropriation of the text and the context. The IBR process starts from the simple understanding of the text and the context going through the others' comprehension to broaden the original vision in a performative and transcendent response.

There is also a prominent target difference between the two methods. Any CBS requires the participation of the poor and the marginalised as common readers, as well as the socially engaged scholars' will to recognise their epistemological priority. Even though IBR frequently includes marginalised groups, poor communities and socially engaged scholars amongst readers, their participation is not a condition for intercultural dialogue.

From the CBR perspective, it is a failure that not always IBR promotes militancy in theologically trained readers or political action amongst poor communities and marginalised groups. In the effort to fill the lack of evidence about the transformative processes, derived from Bible reading, transformation itself could become just information for the empirical analysis. From the IBR perspective, there is a risk in CBR to transfer engaged scholars' high aspirations of structural transformation to the communities and groups, dismissing modest signals of the upcoming God's Kingdom. Unwittingly trained readers could impose their agenda on common readers in the process.

Beyond these differences and tensions, the cases reported here let us see how both methods are intended for liberation. The cooperation between biblical scholars and theologians, as trained readers, and ordinary readers from poor and marginalised communities generates a mutual learning process that grows counter-hegemonic interpretations. These Colombian experiences of contextual and inter-contextual readings of the Bible converged in the emancipatory transformation of the communities and their contexts.

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## Author's contributions

The author participated in the Contextual Bible Reading of Judges 19:1–30 and Luke 15:11–32 as well as in the Intercultural Bible Reading of Luke 18:1–8 working with the communities and analysing the information. In the Intercultural Bible Reading of Genesis 2:4b–25, he only participated in the analysis of the information.

## Ethical considerations

All participants signed the informed consent in which they manifested their will to participate in the Contextual Bible Reading or Intercultural Bible Reading experiences. To ensure the safety and anonymity of the participants in the reported cases, their names are omitted. The research protocols were approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of the Theology Faculty at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana – 8478.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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