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For the Bible tells me so? An explorative study of children's critical and theological ability to engage with the Bible, using a Contextual Bible Study, on the Widow's Offering in Mark 12 as a case study.

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

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Abstract

The flat narratives presented in Children's Bibles typify the assumption that children are incapable of engaging theologically and critically with the Biblical texts. The manner in which Biblical stories are told to children during their formative years can have negative repercussions as children perceive the Scriptures as static and irrelevant. By denying children the chance to explore the dynamic text, they will never discover the depth and potential of the life-giving message of the Bible and can become despondent with Christianity, perceiving it as immaterial as the Biblical narratives show no resemblance to reality. Developing a habit of blindly accepting Christian teachings can also develop a faith which allows unhealthy indoctrination and oppressive beliefs into the Christian's life. This thesis explores what is necessary to enable and encourage children to critically and theologically engage with the Bible. Using the story of the Widow's Offering in Mark 12 as an example, the traditional readings present in Children's Bibles were compared to a critical reading of the text. A Contextual Bible Study was then conducted with two case studies from grade 1 and 4 at Scottsville Primary in order to determine whether children are able to critically and theologically engage with the concepts of Christian Humanism and textual criticism. The findings reveal that this is an important area of research that requires urgent further investigation.

Chapter 1

Introduction, Background and Context

1.1 Children's Bibles Limited to Representing the Ideal

Over the last few years I have had a growing awareness of Children's Bibles and their influence on young Christians' perception of God, faith and themselves. Accompanying this interest is a growing space on my bookshelves allocated to Children's Bibles. While quickly flipping through the pages of a number of these books I noticed that every aspect of the Children's Bibles depicted idyllic scenarios and situations. The different indexes are filled only with the impressive and miraculous stories, the characters are illustrated in stylised perfection and described as flawless heroes. The narratives are smoothed over presenting a single, decided voice of the Bible. In the pictures, the grass is usually green and the flowers blossoming. In addition to this, at the end of each story in *Bible Stories for Growing Kids*¹, there is a page titled 'growing time' full of facts and questions for the children to discuss and think about; the various accompanying illustrations show a 'typical' nuclear family of four sitting round the dinner table, saying grace over full plates of food, or a child nestled up close to – what appears to be – their father and finally, there are drawings of children playing in a playground. These Bibles present a one dimensional story, neatly packaged with a distinct structure and message. But these idealised narratives can be hurtful, to those whose context is not presented as they make them feel more isolated, and unhelpful as their message is irrelevant for the complex realities and dire situations many children face.

This picture of a perfect world, filled with perfect, 'smiling' people, presented by Children's Bibles is not representative of the world that the Old and New Testaments were written in, for their contexts were certainly not easy or ideal. There are many stories of violence, neglect, treachery, slavery and oppression recorded within the Canon: even with just a brief survey of Genesis we find the stories of Abel's murder by his brother Cain², the floods annihilating entire populations during the time of Noah³, the sin and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah⁴, Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt⁵, Lot's daughters tricking him into

¹ Rivers, F. & S. Rivers Coibion. 2008. *Bible Stories for Growing Kids*. South Africa: Christian Art Kids.

² Genesis 4

³ Genesis 5 – 9

⁴ Genesis 18: 16 – 19: 25

impregnating them⁶, Abraham's wife Sarah leading people into adulterous relations by claiming to be Abraham's sister⁷, the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael⁸, Jacob swindling Esau out of his birthright⁹, Jacob made to marry Leah before Rachel as had been arranged¹⁰, Dinah's violation¹¹, Tamar's rape¹² and finally the story of slavery, deceit, abandonment and trial recorded in the account of Joseph.¹³ From the sheer number of examples shown, it is clear that the original Scriptures do not depict an ideal world of unblemished heroes and serene situations.

1.2 The Ideal as a Misrepresentation of Reality

Having noted this discrepancy between the Scriptures and the narratives within the Children's Bibles, I approached a few friends, and raised the issue. Their response was one echoed by a number of other people that I broached the topic with, 'naturally, we wouldn't want to expose our children to those sorts of stories.' While acknowledging that we hope to protect our children, and prevent them from knowing or engaging with the evils of this world, I cannot accept this as a justified response. Having spoken to a large number of children at church and on children's camps who have been deeply hurt by tragic experiences and live daily in desperate circumstances, I find it saddening to realise that the negative elements that are filtered out of the Biblical stories are in fact a reality in many children's lives.¹⁴ There are also still, many adults who are dealing with the ramifications of their painful childhoods.

The statistics for child neglect and abuse across the world are horrifying. The South African Human Rights Commission and UNICEF South Africa released *South Africa's Children: A Review of Equity and Child Rights*¹⁵ which quotes the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*¹⁶

⁵ Genesis 18: 26

⁶ Genesis 19: 30-38

⁷ Genesis 20

⁸ Genesis 16, 17 & 21

⁹ Genesis 25: 19-34

¹⁰ Genesis 29: 14-30

¹¹ Genesis 34

¹² Genesis 38

¹³ Genesis 37-50

¹⁴ James raises similar concerns in her article, James, G.L. 2007. *Tell It Like It Is! The Case to Include the Story of the Rape of Tamar in Children's Bibles as an Awareness Tool*. *Journal for Semitics*, Is 2, Vol 16, 312-332. p315

¹⁵ SAHRC & UNICEF. March 2011. *South Africa's Children: A Review of Equity and Child Rights*. South Africa: South African Human Rights Commission & UNICEF South Africa.

parallel to related statistics which demonstrate to what extent children are experiencing these rights. The report begins by stating that ‘there are some 49.9 million people in South Africa, with 18.6 million being children under the age of 18 years’, followed by statistics relating to these 18.6 million children, some of which are:

- ‘7 million of these children live in the poorest 20 percent of households.’¹⁷ With this percent of the population ‘earning only 1.8 percent of total national household income.’¹⁸
- ‘Overall, nearly four out of ten children live in households with no employed household members. Among the poorest, seven out of ten children live in households with no economically active members.’¹⁹
- ‘In South Africa, just one in three children live with both biological parents. Overall, one in five children has lost one or both parents. ... Some 1.9 million children have lost one or both parents due to AIDS.’²⁰
- ‘Violence against children is pervasive in the country. Over 56, 500 children were reported to be victims of violent crime in 2009/10, yet many more crimes remain unreported. People closest to them perpetrate the majority of cases of child sexual and physical abuse’.²¹ ‘Sexual Offences are often committed against young children: 29% of all sexual offences against children involve children aged 0-10 years old, and 31% involve children 11-14 years old.’²²
- ‘1 in 3 children nationwide experience hunger or are at risk of hunger.’²³
- ‘nearly 1.5 million children (8% of all children) live in households with no toilet facility.’²⁴
- ‘Over 88, 600 children were declared in need of care by a children’s court during 2009/10.’²⁵

¹⁶ This Convention produced by the United Nations was adopted by South Africa in 1995, being entrenched by the Bill of Rights in the country’s Constitution.

¹⁷ SAHRC & UNICEF. March 2011. *South Africa’s Children: A Review of Equity and Child Rights*. South Africa: South African Human Rights Commission & UNICEF South Africa. p3

¹⁸ Ibid. p12

¹⁹ Ibid. p4

²⁰ Ibid. p6

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. p55; The same statistics are recorded in SAPS. 2010/2011. *Crime Report*. South African Police Service. 11, ibid.

²³ SAHRC & UNICEF. March 2011. *South Africa’s Children: A Review of Equity and Child Rights*. South Africa: South African Human Rights Commission & UNICEF South Africa. p23

²⁴ Ibid. p29

²⁵ Ibid. p52

The statistics released by the South African Police Service echo these findings, citing between 3 473 and 6 504 cases of neglect and ill-treatment of children annually between 2003 and 2011, while in the same time span the total sexual offences in South Africa, across the ages, was between 63 818 and 70 514 reported cases.²⁶ It is likely that the real numbers are substantially greater than these as the very nature of abuse and sexual offences means that they are very often not reported.

These numbers are not limited to South Africa, or even Africa; the National Children's Alliance has released information stating that 'in 2010, an estimated 1, 560 children died from abuse and neglect in the United States. In the same year, Children's Advocacy Centres around the country provided support to over 266, 000 child victims and their families. In 2011, this number was over 279,000.'²⁷ Kofi Annan prefaces the United Nation's Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children saying,

Violence against children cuts across boundaries of geography, race, class, religion and culture. It occurs in homes, schools and streets: in places of work and entertainment, and in care and detention centres. Perpetrators include parents, family members, teachers, caretakers, law enforcement authorities and other children. Some children are particularly vulnerable because of gender, race, ethnic origin, disability or social status. And no country is immune, whether rich or poor.²⁸

1.3 Reality Represented in the Bible

These facts and statistics illustrate that children are not adequately protected from the evils of this world. It is tragic that faith is then separated from these experiences that children deal with; for the figure of Christ, the community of Christians and the Scriptures have been a source of real strength, encouragement and hope for so many people throughout the ages. In many instances throughout South Africa, the Bible is already regarded as an established means of change, for it is viewed as having inherent power to transform situations.²⁹ Therefore, it seems unjust to introduce children to a flat and unhelpful version of Christianity which is present in so many modern Children's Bibles, without ever even alluding to the

²⁶ SAPS. 1997. < http://www.saps.gov.za/women_children/women_children.htm >, accessed 21 May 2012. South African Police Services: Department of Police.

²⁷ National, Children's Alliance. 2009. *National Children's Alliance: Empowering Local Communities to Serve Child Victims of Abuse*. <<http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/NCAFactSheet>>. 15 July 2012. United States of America, Washington, DC.

²⁸ Pinheiro, Paulo Sergio. 2006. *World Report on Violence Against Children: Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children*. Geneva: United Nations. pXI

²⁹ McGrath, A. 2007. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. p65-66

possibility that there may be a greater depth to the faith which could be a source of courage and comfort. It would then seem natural for children who have only encountered a superficial faith to grow up despondent with religion. The tools of critical and theological discussion will not have been developed, resulting in people being unable to even begin navigating through the difficult questions of faith and how it applies to life. Yet, one realises as one reads through the Scriptures, that the authors of the Bible and the biblical characters are not as accepting or perfect as the children's Bibles often portray, but are also wrestling with matters of injustice, faith and life. An example of this is found in *Bible Stories for Growing Kids*³⁰ where Job is presented as relentlessly praising God, and completely unquestioning of the tragedies that have befallen him, by emphasising statements such as, 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord'³¹ and 'Should we accept only good things from God, and not bad? Even if God kills me, I will trust Him'³² in bold print. The story narrated in the children's Bibles focuses on Job 1-2, 42, while only briefly referring to the dialogue, discontentment and honest struggle contained in chapters 3-41 of the Wisdom Literature.

1.4 Incorporating Reality into Children's Bibles

In the article *Perfect Prophets, Helpful Hippos, and Happy Endings: Noah and Jonah in Children's Bible Storybooks in the United States*, Dalton critiques the approach and style of writing in Children's Bibles as 'often reducing the stories to simplified morality tales with bible heroes serving as upstanding role models.'³³ Dalton surmises that this characteristic of Children's Bibles is a result of many of the fundamental features of the Hebraic text having been discarded in an attempt to provide children with an uncomplicated read. Yet, it was through these removed, characteristic features which were highlighted by Dalton, that readers are able to engage with the narratives, namely; 'the rich story and discourse of Hebrew Bible stories, their built-in gaps and ambiguities, their multivalent nature, and their example of fallible people in the face of God's grace.'³⁴

³⁰ Rivers, F.R. & S.R. Coibion. 2007. *Bible Stories for Growing Kids*. Vereemiging, South Africa: Christian Art Kids. p105

³¹ Job 1:21

³² This statement, emphasised in the story of Job is an amalgamation of Job 2:10 '... shall we accept good from God, and not trouble' and Job 13:15, 'though he slay me, yet I shall hope in him...'

³³ Dalton, R.W. Summer 2007. *Perfect Prophets, Helpful Hippos, and Happy Endings: Noah and Jonah in Children's Bible Storybooks in the United States. Religious Education, Is 3, Vol 102, 298-313.*

³⁴ Ibid. p298

Similar concerns are raised by James as she explores the exclusion of the story of the rape of Tamar found in 2 Samuel 13 from Children's Bibles. To pretend that the lives children live are unmarred is not only naive but unfair, for we deprive children of safe spaces to express their trauma and tools which could enable them to cope with their situations. It is in her article, *Tell It Like It Is! The case to include the story of the rape of Tamar in Children's Bibles as an awareness tool*, that James challenges those who teach religious education to children about being irrelevant by avoiding addressing the real issues of society.³⁵ While acknowledging the desire to shield children from the atrocities of life, James explores the awareness that could potentially be created by introducing Tamar's narrative to children. Her findings demonstrate that the benefits from retaining the raw discourse from the Scriptures outweigh those of removing the story.³⁶

James' observations lead her to conclude that it is each stories' 'thrill factor'³⁷ that determines whether it would be traditionally included in the Children's Bible or not. The dramatic tales or the ones which allow for the most eccentric illustrations are often the ones recorded and related, while stories of the seemingly mundane, day-to-day interactions with Jesus are neglected. Although readers can appreciate an entertaining read, it is the 'normal' stories of Jesus and his disciples, walking and talking, sorting out conflicts and stilling fears which readers most often relate to. The tales of dramatic miraculous events, like the floods of Noah's ark and the parting of the Red Sea for Moses speak are not as easily appropriated. Various combinations of stories included within children's Bibles convey different messages and theological trajectories to readers, affecting their interaction with the Bible and their perception of God. From this, it can be said, that the process of selecting stories to be included within Children's Bibles is a very important one.

This study looks at the story of the 'Widow's Offering' as a means of discerning to what extent alternative messages of the Scriptures are reflected within the Children's Bibles. This was done by comparing the message that the Children's Bibles present from Mark 12:41-44, with the message gleaned from more scholarly readings of the pericope, Mark 12:38 – 13:2. Subsequent to the thorough exegesis of the text, the findings were converted into a

³⁵ James, G.L. 2007. *Tell It Like It Is! The Case to Include the Story of the Rape of Tamar in Children's Bibles as an Awareness Tool*. *Journal for Semitics*, Is 2, Vol 16, 312-332. P313-22

³⁶ Ibid. p312-22

³⁷ Ibid. p313

Contextual Bible Study, which was facilitated as a case study with a grade 1 and a grade 4 class from Scottsville Primary School, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. By broadening the reading to the larger pericope, the critical and theological capabilities of children were investigated, by observing their interaction with the text. The central thesis of the study is that it is a mistake not to engage critically with young readers, because it is in these developmental years that many theological perceptions are established, and it is vital that these beliefs are ones which are life-affirming, rather than life-denying.³⁸

1.5 Children's Ability to Cope with Contextual Theology

From my experience with primary school children on Scripture Union³⁹ camps as well as my involvement in other children's ministries, I anticipated that the children would be able to cope with the depth of Scripture exposed to them through this Contextual Bible Study. Throughout the years, many young campers have humbled and even challenged their older, Christian, group leaders. The children offer unexpectedly insightful thoughts on verses and books, and they can convey the stories to their peers who may not necessarily have grasped the biblical message clearly, even when it was originally told by someone older who is considered more experienced and therefore expected to be more articulate. The questions asked also suggest that the children are not satisfied with many of the superficial, 'easy' explanations given to them, and long to know more in order to construct a more detailed, and coherent picture.

Christians are familiar with the idea of a child-like faith, as the verse 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'⁴⁰ Yet, it is assumed that the attributes which Jesus was talking about are not their theological insights, but rather their 'trusting and unpretentious'⁴¹ characteristics. This study does not intend to challenge the understanding of a child-like faith which encourages the mimicking of a hopeful, loving and accepting nature, but it does seek to add another dimension to that; a critically engaging and inquisitive attitude.

³⁸ The phrases "life-affirming" and "life-denying" are often used in liberation theologies and act as a benchmark for sound hermeneutical practices. See for example: Nadar, S. 2009 July. *'The Bible Says!', Feminism, Hermeneutics and Neo-Pentecostal Challenges.* *Journal for Theology for Southern Africa*, Is Vol 134, 131-146.

³⁹ Scripture Union is an international organisation, with a base in South Africa. I have more specifically been involved with the camping ministry at Glenhaven, situated on the outskirts of Underberg, KwaZulu-Natal (www.glenhaven.org.za).

⁴⁰ Matthew 18: 3

⁴¹ 1995b. *The NIV study Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. p1902.

The Scriptures make reference to 'children' a number of times, incorporating them into teachings or including them as characters within the narrative. Fields of research are emerging surrounding this, as scholars are re-visiting what the role of children is understood to be biblically and theologically. There are some popular and well-known stories of children in the Bible; the story of David and Goliath, the Prophet Samuel, Joseph and the little boy who gave the disciples his fish and loaves to distribute among others. Yet, it is interesting to note, that the ages of these young characters are not emphasised within the stories.⁴² This trend parallels society which often overlooks children, treating them as inferior or unimportant, with little or nothing to contribute. This attitude denies children their full value and humanity.⁴³

Menn in her article, *A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the Little Israelite Servant Girl*, argues against this attitude. 2 Kings 5: 1-19 is used as an example where a young child rises up to offer wisdom and direction to those around her. Before that example is fully explored, Menn draws attention to other young, biblical characters who assert themselves, such as Moses' sister⁴⁴, Miriam and King David as a shepherd boy⁴⁵. They step forward, and having assessed the situation, initiate action plans which provide solutions for potentially dire situations for their family and people.⁴⁶ In the same way that such depictions contrasted and confronted the views of people during the time that they were written, they continue to challenge modern day societies' understanding about a child's function and capabilities. Menn suggests that the Bible includes the biblical characters and leaders, 'perhaps not in spite of their youth but because of it.'⁴⁷

The young, Israelite girl in 2 Kings 5: 1-19 'suggests a solution to a difficult problem, intervening when adults are threatened and ineffectual, offering theological insight into God's ways, and acting within the context of international conflict between cultures and

⁴² Menn, E.M. October 2008. *A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5: 1-19)*. *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Is 35, Vol 5, 340-348. p340

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Exodus 2: 7

⁴⁵ 1Samuel 16:11

⁴⁶ Menn, E.M. October 2008. *A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5: 1-19)*. *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Is 35, Vol 5, 340-348. p346-47.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p341

national identities.⁴⁸ The dramatic contrast between what is considered significant, and that which is considered insignificant is highlighted, as they function counter intuitively, challenging the manner in which society discerns value. The nameless, servant girl becomes instrumental in directing her mistress's important husband, Naaman the commander of a powerful Syrian army, towards healing from his leprosy. It is surprising that the Israelite girl responds as she does towards Namaan, for he is likely to be her captor and representative of the violence against and domination of her people, yet she displays compassion and a hope for restoration for him. The importance of the role of the child is emphasised as Namaan's skin is likened to that of 'a young boy'⁴⁹ after being rejuvenated. This child's attitude embodies the message of love, justice, inclusion, reconciliation and hope, found within the Scriptures, as she recognises another's humanity in the most unlikely situation.

There is another dimension held within the discourse of 2 Kings 5: 1-19 which affirms the line of thinking which was articulated earlier; that children encounter, and have to deal with, hardship. Within the footnotes, Menn discreetly writes, 'in some cases, such as the teenager Dinah who visited the daughters of the land, the children who cross borders become vulnerable to harm, rape and violence between different tribes and groups of people.'⁵⁰ The Israelite girl is an example of such a situation, as she is forced to leave her family, her protection and all that is familiar to her. Isolated and oppressed, this girl lovingly serves her captors and her peoples' enemy. As shown through these examples, in the Bible, children are shown to comprehend situations for which their insights would normally be completely disregarded.

I believe that children's capabilities to understand and critically engage with the Scriptures, have been grossly underestimated. The extent and depth of insight that children have expressed when reading the Bible, has often astonished me. In articulating these findings academically, I aim to convey the urgency with which this gap in research needs to be addressed.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ 2 Kings 5: 14

⁵⁰ Menn, E.M. October 2008. *A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5: 1-19)*. *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 1s 35, Vol 5, 340-348. p347, footnote 14.

1.6 United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

The history and doctrine of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) – the denomination to which I belong – follows this line of thinking, even though it is not necessarily evident in practise. This is seen as the sacrament of baptism is a visible sign of inclusion into the Christian faith and the community of believers, as cleansing from the past in preparation for the covenant and new life is symbolised.⁵¹ Children are invited to partake of this sacrament, as the Congregational Church is not prescriptive in its method of baptism; recognising adult, child or infant baptism, through immersion, affusion or sprinkling. The only limitation is that baptism is only administered once, for re-administering baptism renounces God's work and presence in the previous acts of baptism.

The inclusion of children into the practise of baptism is one which demonstrates the Congregationalists' belief that children are completely accepted by Christ and are welcomed as full members of the Church. This is reinforced by the Congregationalists adamant refusal to distinguish between different people and their theological capabilities. The theology of the 'priesthood of all believers' which makes little distinction between clergy and laity is emphasised. This inclusive attitude extends to the young, further supported by Scriptures such as Psalm 8:2, 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'. The UCCSA policy reflects this as it requires, rather than suggests, that children receive Christian education and training, stating that 'it is never too early to begin [Christian education], however simply.'⁵²

These governing principles reflect the history of the UCCSA in Southern Africa. The early missionaries in Kuruman, as an example of those who were the first representatives of the denomination in South Africa, built a classroom before building a church, in order to ensure that as many people as possible could read the Bible, among other books, for themselves. de Gruchy describes it: 'At the heart of their faith was the Bible, and it was crucial to them that people could learn to read and understand the Scriptures in their own language, and that they could then go on to become teachers of the faith themselves.'⁵³ Robert Moffat, the

⁵¹ Briggs, D.R. 1996. *A Covenant Church: Studies in the Polity of The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa in Terms of Its Covenant*. Botswana: Pula Press. P140-60.

⁵² Ibid. p158.

⁵³ de Gruchy, S. 1999. *40 Days in the Desert: Biblical Meditations from Moffat Mission, on the Edge of the Kalahari*. Botswana: Pula Press. p48.

founder of the Kuruman Mission Station⁵⁴, became fluent in Setswana and put the translations on paper, subsequently making him the first to translate portions of the Bible into a Southern African language.⁵⁵ The conviction to make the Bible as accessible as possible for all people, through literacy and language, lies close to the heart of the UCCSA. Therefore it can be seen that the desire to create accessible translations of the Bible, which people can truly engage with themselves, is not a new one, but rather a continuation of long-standing convictions.

1.7 Critical Questions

The key research question of this study is, 'What is needed in order to enable and encourage children to critically and theologically engage with the Bible?' The sub-questions are:

- How does a critical reading of the Bible extend the traditional readings present in Children's Bibles, using the story of the Widow's Offering as an example?
- What is needed in Children's Bibles to enable and encourage critical and theological thinking?
- Are children able to critically and theologically engage with the concepts of Christian Humanism through a Contextual Bible Study exploring the 'Widow's Offering' in Mark 12? Are children able to understand the concepts of 'behind the text', 'on the text' and 'in front of the text' as described in the Contextual Bible Study method? Can children then expand all that's 'in front of the text', applying it to their own lives?
- How does this research impact and influence the current attitude towards children, children's Bibles and Bible studies? In light of this study, and expanding on it, what further research needs to be conducted in and around this topic?

These sub-questions each form the basis for chapters 3 to 6.

1.8 Introducing Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

In order to explore the extent to which children are able to critically engage with the Bible, this study includes a combination of a textual study, as well as an empirical study. The textual study includes an exploration of the concept of a Christian Humanist, the theoretical work promoting Contextual Bible Studies as well as an exegesis of Mark 12. The Scripture

⁵⁴ Butler, A. 1999. *Kuruman: The work of the LMS in Bechuanaland*. In *Changing Frontiers: The Mission Story of the UCCSA*, ed. S. de Gruchy. Botswana: Pula Press. p38.

⁵⁵ de Gruchy, S. 1999. *40 Days in the Desert: Biblical Meditations from Moffat Mission, on the Edge of the Kalahari*. Botswana: Pula Press. p52-55.

passage is explored further through the different hermeneutical readings of the text; there is a socio-historical reading which develops a greater understanding of the text, as well as a narrative reading exploring the literary aspects of the story. The Empirical research involved facilitating a Bible Study with two groups of children.

1.9 Christian Humanism

The primary theoretical framework which will be used is John W. de Gruchy's theological understanding of being a Christian Humanist. de Gruchy, an ordained minister in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, authored a book entitled *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*.⁵⁶ Inspired by Augustine's autobiographical *The Confessions*⁵⁷ which introduces theological issues through his own experiences, de Gruchy constructs a theology of a Christian Humanist, as he shares and reflects on his experiences in ministry, South Africa and life. In this theological framework, all people are understood to have inherent value, as they have been made in the Image of God. And since God, through the incarnation of Jesus became fully human, to be Christian can also be understood to being 'more fully human.'⁵⁸ In response to this belief, people are to engage with each other in mutual love and respect, conducting themselves in a manner which affirms all life. Following the beliefs of being a Christian humanist, people accept an invitation to partner with God and God's plans for the World. 'Hope' therefore becomes a primary characteristic of Christian Humanists, as God becomes relevant, speaking into areas of injustice and Christians actively seek to bring about peace and reconciliation. Christian Humanism is the most appropriate framework to use in this study as it embodies the conviction for social justice which is present in liberation, black, feminist and other theologies, but it speaks more widely across the different groups, in a fresh and engaging manner.

The concept of being a Christian Humanist extends beyond the theoretical and into practical application, which is an important element required to instil self-worth into individuals and bring about change within society. It is important to introduce children to a theology which requires them to critically engage with what they are experiencing in their contexts, rather than continuously presenting children with the monotonous, and surface-level moral

⁵⁶ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

⁵⁷ Augustine, St. 2004. *The Confessions*. Massachusetts, USA: Hendrickson Publishers.

⁵⁸ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p31.

principles. The extent to which the children can cope with the ideas of Christian Humanism presented in the Contextual Bible Study, will affect the way in which the Bible is taught to children, their view of God and the Bible and ultimately what their conviction for working towards justice will be.

1.10 Research Design

Research around the story in Mark 12 of the 'Widow's Offering' was conducted using existing work that other Biblical Scholars have already produced. Research done around the specific text of Mark 12:38-13:2 was considered, as well as research looking at social structures and society in first century Palestine.⁵⁹ In conjunction with this socio-historical analysis of the text, a narrative reading of the pericope was carried out. This literary reading of the text is then compared to the manner in which the text has been presented to children in the past in Children's Bibles. This specific structure of the study demonstrates how this story illustrates the fundamental elements of Christian Humanism. A Bible study appropriate for introducing children to the concept of being a Christian Humanist will then be designed using the story of the 'Widow's Offering'.

The empirical study to test all of the work established above, was conducted through a case study, using the Contextual Bible Study method as a tool to explore the research question. The case study, or 'critical case sampling', is a means of selecting a representative few, in order to draw possible implications about the many.⁶⁰ As this is an exploratory study, qualitative research methods were used. The two groups selected were from two classes at Scottsville Primary, where Bible reading is encouraged by the teachers. This way, the use of the Contextual Bible study methods, were not intimidating for the children, as they are used to doing regular Bible Studies with their teachers, even if not in such a way. Furthermore the Contextual Bible Study was the most appropriate method of collecting data, as it is an innovative means of allowing children to express themselves, and demonstrate their ideas in a way in which an interview with them would not allow.

⁵⁹ Horsley, R.A. 1994. *Sociology and the Jesus Movement: Second Edition*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company. is an example of a scholar who has explored the socio-historical context of first century Palestine.

⁶⁰ Blanche, M.T., K. Durrheim & D. Painter. 2007. *Research in Practice: Applied Methods for the Social Sciences: 2nd Edition*. South Africa: UCT Press. p290.

Christian humanism fully acknowledges the reality and importance of people's experiences, leading to the understanding that there can be no theological conversation without a dialogue with people's contexts. This perspective is in line with the fundamental principle of Contextual Bible Studies, which is committed to revealing what the Scriptures themselves are saying and then applying this to the local church, communities and the lives of individual Christians. Another way in which the method of Contextual Bible Study is in line with Christian humanism, is that the interpretation of the Scriptures is not limited to biblical scholars, but all readers are perceived as having a valuable contribution to offer in the interpretation of the text.⁶¹

The Contextual Bible Study on the 'Widow's Offering' in Mark 12, designed by Ujamaa, revisits the well-known text, reading it with new eyes and discovering a message which has been overlooked in the past.⁶² Jesus speaks into important areas of society, as he warns leaders against abusing their authority. This new message gleaned from the narrative demonstrates the ideals of Christian humanism. Traditionally, the story is used to illustrate the need for generous giving among Christians, but incorporating the two verses before and after the pericope into the reading suggests a much more transformative message of justice. Jesus is seen not only as acknowledging the woman's selfless act, but also drawing attention to the injustices experienced by the poor woman. Jesus speaks into important areas of society, as he warns the leaders against abusing their authority, dismissing their self-interested behaviour which takes advantage of the vulnerable.

There has been a fair amount of research around Contextual Bible Study and this particular text, in an attempt to understand people's engagement with the Bible. This study will not only offer new insight as it is conducted within the fresh theoretical framework of Christian humanism, but more importantly, it explores children's engagement with the Scriptures, through a case study of a Contextual Bible Study on Mark 12 with a select number of children at Scottsville Primary, which is recorded in chapter 5.

⁶¹ Illiterate people who listen to readings of the Bible are included within this term.

⁶² Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, which serves local churches and communities with biblical and theological resources for social transformation. (<http://sorat.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx>). The Bible Study referred to can be found in, West, G.O. Draft November 2007. *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*. Produced by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development and Research. p18-25.

The emphasis of Christian humanism on critically engaging with theology and situations within current contexts will be used as means to critique and analyse the way that children interact with the passage of Scripture. The children's responses will be evaluated according to whether they are able to understand the story of the Widow's Offering, beyond the traditional portrayal of 'God loves a cheerful giver' to the interpretation which addresses issues of injustice. This Contextual Bible Study of this story is an effective tool, as it not only incorporated the values of Christian humanism, but it also prompts people – or children – to articulate their thoughts. The formulation of these answers will then be analysed. The study will determine if there are any deliberate, systematic and enquiring thoughts, which would suggest that children were critically and theologically engaging with the Bible if they are given the opportunity to do so.

In this introductory chapter, the quest for creating a Children's Bible which not only more accurately reflects the original Scriptures, but also invites children to engage critically with more relevant issues is introduced. The motivation for conducting such a study is found in the hope that the Bible can tend some of the painful hurts which children have unfortunately gained through tragic life experiences. The approach to Children's Bibles will have to adapt in order for such a reading to be revealed. The Contextual Bible Study method will be used as an investigative research tool to discern whether children are able to cope with this more critical reading of the Bible than traditional Children's Bibles assume. The story of the Widow's Offering, will be the text used in the Contextual Bible Study to introduce children to the principles of Christian humanism. The next chapter will explain this theoretical framework of Christian humanism, as it is the lens through which this study has been conducted.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework: Christian Humanism

Christian humanism is an important lens through which this study can be conducted, as it combines the Scriptural texts with modern concerns, responding particularly against areas of injustice and oppression. Its honest and critical approach creates the space for dialogue between the Bible and current contexts, making it relevant. There is an expectation from Christian humanists that the quest for justice and peace will not remain a theory, but that plans will be made to practically implement it. This is important as Christian humanism initiates transformation and change within individuals and society, restoring people's dignity and protecting their humanity.

There is little consensus over the definition of a 'humanist', and the term 'Christian humanist', for many, seems an oxymoron or a contradiction in terms. Increasingly the ideals and essence of humanism have been associated with secular movements and thought. In order to establish a more thorough understanding of this concept, the development of humanism will be tracked through history. Only once this has been achieved will the concept of 'Christian humanism' be introduced; first as it is typically interpreted, and then exploring a more detailed description offered by John de Gruchy in his book *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*.⁶³

2.1 Humanist

The concept of humanism or being a humanist is certainly not a new one. It is generally accepted that the movement began towards the end of the fourteenth century⁶⁴, and people such as Petrarch, an Italian scholar and poet, are considered to be some of the forerunners of the humanism as they turned to the early, Greek writers for insight into human nature. Yet there are scholars who suggest that there are some historical figures from even before this time, who are eligible candidates for the title 'humanist'. In his article, *Humanism, Yesterday and Today*⁶⁵, it is people and societies from beyond the expected

⁶³ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

⁶⁴ Long, E.T. 1989 Fall. *Christianity and Humanism*. *The Personalist Forum*, Is 2, Vol 5. p119.

⁶⁵ Neilson, F. 1950 January. *Humanism, Yesterday and Today*. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Is 2, Vol 9, 177-189. p177-79.

Italian borders whom Neilson suggests as some of the initial humanists, namely the likes of the Alexandrians - Ptolemies, Soter and Philadelphus - the Englishman Alfred the Great and the Frenchman Charlemagne, and even China's Confucius. Neilson considered these men to be appropriate candidates for the title, as they sought after the ideals of humanism by establishing libraries and encouraging the study of the traditional disciplines and antiquity.

Through the ages, characters have been labelled as humanists, but it is difficult to isolate the defining features and values required to deserve such a title. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*⁶⁶ gives the definition of 'humanism':

1. A rationalistic outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters.
2. A Renaissance cultural movement which turned away from medieval scholasticism and revived interest in ancient Greek and Roman thought.

While McGrath⁶⁷ describes it as:

Humanism: In the strict sense of the word, an intellectual movement linked with the European Renaissance. At the heart of the movement lay, not (as the modern sense of the word might suggest) a set of secular or secularizing ideas, but a new interest in the cultural achievements of antiquity. These were seen as a major resource for the renewal of European culture and Christianity during the period of the Renaissance.

Yet, despite these brief descriptions, there is little or no consensus on a more detailed outline which stipulates the characteristics of a humanist. Beginning as a 'philosophical and literary movement'⁶⁸, it has evolved considerably over the years. During the Italian Renaissance, the liberal arts and the ancient writings were resurrected and studied in pursuit of beauty. Humanism then slowly transformed from a mere love of antiquity to the development of a higher moral standard, as the insights of the classical writers were paired with the enlightened perceptions. The inherent value within humanity was emphasised⁶⁹ and subsequently it was expected that people would conduct themselves in a manner which

⁶⁶ 1999. In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary: Tenth Edition*, ed. J. Pearsall. New York: Oxford University Press. p691.

⁶⁷ McGrath, A. 2007. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. p490.

⁶⁸ Long, E.T. 1989 Fall. *Christianity and Humanism. The Personalist Forum*, Is 2, Vol 5. p119.

⁶⁹ Long articulates this understanding as he writes, '... that persons should be valued as autonomous agents and that persons share their humanity across cultural, religious and political boundaries'. Ibid. p123.

would be for the benefit of all others. Another result of this thinking was that Christ came to be regarded as a moral teacher and good example, rather than the Son of God and Saviour.⁷⁰

Humanism has not remained as a contained movement, and has divided into various threads of humanist thinking. Woelfel authored an article entitled, *Two Types of Humanism*, in which he argued that Freud developed a 'reductionist humanism' which seeks to typify people as objects to be considered scientifically. The second variation of humanism described is that of James, who reverts to the other extreme as he seeks to incorporate every aspect of humanity in his observations, including that which is illogical and confusing, within the holistic 'integral humanism.'⁷¹ There are a number of other value systems which have modified their beliefs by extracting and integrating a number of humanisms' key traits. Long offers a list of these various types of humanists in his article, *Christianity and Humanism*; 'Marxist humanists, Naturalistic humanists, Behavioural humanists, Christian humanists, Jewish humanists and Buddhist humanists'⁷², yet even this list is not exhaustive.

Humanism itself is impartial to religion, yet, with the close association between 'reason' and the ancient Greeks, there is an emphasis on logic, understanding and human capabilities within humanism which has resulted in the rejection of faith and religious belief by many who subscribe to its principles.⁷³ As the perceived authority of governing bodies, institutions and religious leaders has decreased over time, individuals have become more independently-minded. This shift in perspective can be seen in society's dramatic change in attitude towards sex and sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁴ People no longer felt obliged to follow the lifestyle prescribed by the church and behaved however they, themselves, decided was appropriate. By extrapolating this thinking, Secular humanism emerged. In 1961 the U.S. Supreme Court recognised it as a religion.⁷⁵ Despite this official acknowledgement, no description of what beliefs were attached to the religion were given until a number of years later when Conlan and Whitehead defined Secular humanism as, 'a religion whose

⁷⁰ 2005. *Humanism*. In *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition*, ed. L. Jones. USA: MacMillan Reference. p4174-75.

⁷¹ Woelfel, J. 1972. *Two Types of Humanism*. *Christian Century*, Is 9, Vol 89, 249-252.

⁷² Long, E.T. 1989 Fall. *Christianity and Humanism*. *The Personalist Forum*, Is 2, Vol 5. p124.

⁷³ Toumey, C.P. 1993 summer. *Evolution and Secular Humanism*. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Is 2, Vol 61, 275-301. p288.

⁷⁴ This was largely prompted by the public introduction of the birth-control pill.

⁷⁵ Toumey, C.P. 1993 summer. *Evolution and Secular Humanism*. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Is 2, Vol 61, 275-301. p277-78.

doctrine worships Man as the source of all knowledge and truth, whereas theism worships God as the source of all wisdom and truth.⁷⁶

Secular humanism has for many people become synonymous with all humanism. This becomes clear in examples such as the book *The Battle for the Mind*⁷⁷, where the author LaHaye uses 'humanism' and 'Secular humanism' interchangeably when describing 'humanism'. Aware of this perception, it then becomes clear why the term 'Christian humanism' would seem paradoxical.

2.2 Christian Humanist

The first person to be considered a 'Christian humanist' was Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam as he utilised the works of the Church Fathers and the great Hellenistic writers to consider and critique society and the church.⁷⁸ Like the more traditional understanding of a humanist, Erasmus focused on the character of Jesus, rather than his divine role and purpose, for he felt that the 'academic theologians had produced a theological science that concentrated on trivial, abstruse questions of little or no real value to the needs of the tangible church.'⁷⁹ Erasmus was the first to lead a revolt based on humanistic principles, as he stood up against the educated elite for the benefit of society. He was incensed by the destructive nature of royalty, who carelessly undermined and destroyed all that the people had built and worked towards.⁸⁰ He too challenged the material wealth and greed of the clergy, pointedly arguing that they should be in search of what he considered Godly treasures, rather than the Earth's treasures. It was the wealthy who were the limited few who were privileged enough to be acquainted with the humanist values of education and knowledge, and at the same time they were the ones to be challenged by the cultural shifts which were spreading through the levels of society. Yet the Christian humanist attempts to rectify the situations of abuse and oppression were not entirely successful. Luther would later continue this challenge against the unjust authorities.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p280.

⁷⁷ LaHaye, T. 1980. *The Battle for the Mind*. Chicago: Fleming H. Revell.

⁷⁸ 2005. *Humanism*. In *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition*, ed. L. Jones. USA: MacMillan Reference. p4176-77.

⁷⁹ Nauert, C.G. 1998 summer. *Humanist as Method: Roots of Conflict with the Scholastics*. *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Is 2, Vol 29, 427-438. p431.

⁸⁰ Neilson, F. 1950 January. *Humanism, Yesterday and Today*. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Is 2, Vol 9, 177-189. p183.

One of the most obvious links between the traditional humanists and Christianity is the value placed on the original sources and classical texts. The Christian humanists parallel the Renaissance's move towards antiquity and the ancient writings as the Bible and the work of the Church Fathers was brought into focus.⁸¹ In fact, many of the Christian reformers ascribed to the ideals of humanism; Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others were all educated within the humanities, developing a respect for knowledge beyond theology and its related fields. The disciplines of history, classical literature and culture and philosophical thinking were promoted in their teachings. Anything which supported the progress and betterment of human life was encouraged, and logic and knowledge were seen as a means of achieving such aspirations. Humanism vehemently defends the belief that each individual's life has an inherent value. Humanism does not tolerate situations where people's dignity is being undermined and so speaks strongly against instances where people are being taken advantage of. Mimicking this, Christian humanism is not limited to that which is obviously theological, encompassing the more 'tangible' elements of people's lives. For the Christian humanist is not only concerned with soteriological issues, but also other issues of social justice: ensuring that people have access to food, water, medical facilities, education and the like.⁸²

In response to the increased association of humanism with Secular humanism, Christians have progressively rejected the concept of humanism, thereby inadvertently dismissing many of the positive values which it prescribes.⁸³ The modern Secular humanist and the Christian humanist share a mutual regard for humanity, although the two differ as to why this conclusion is made. The difference between humanism – whether it is secular or impartial to religious beliefs – and Christian humanism is where the source of value and commitment stems from. Those who subscribe to the former system consider humanity itself independently sufficient for validating its own significance. While the latter sees God as the creator and original source of power and worth. God is considered the foundation on which the humanist views build, and is therefore seen as an underlying and substantiating

⁸¹ de Gruchy, J. W. 2010. *John Calvin, Karl Barth and Christian humanism. Teologie 150 + Calvyn 500*, Is Vol Deel 51 Supplementum, 370-378. p372. And 2005. *Humanism*. In *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition*, ed. L. Jones. USA: MacMillan Reference. p4147.

⁸² de Gruchy, J. W. 2010. *John Calvin, Karl Barth and Christian humanism. Teologie 150 + Calvyn 500*, Is Vol Deel 51 Supplementum, 370-378. p370. And Long, E.T. 1989 Fall. *Christianity and Humanism. The Personalist Forum*, Is 2, Vol 5. p119.

⁸³ de Gruchy, J. W. 2010. *John Calvin, Karl Barth and Christian humanism. Teologie 150 + Calvyn 500*, Is Vol Deel 51 Supplementum, 370-378. p373.

element.⁸⁴ Christian humanists attribute the inherent worth to being created in the 'image of God'. From this it can be deduced that a person's value is not a consequence of a faith in God, but intrinsic within every person as they are created in the likeness of God. Falk suggests that this nature is embedded within all people regardless of their religious affiliation, which would explain how even those who are not believers exhibit these characteristics.⁸⁵

2.3 *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*

John W. de Gruchy follows this Christian trajectory of humanism. While recognising that the human-centric perspective can result in self-reliance on the part of humanity, thereby encouraging the rejection of a deity⁸⁶, de Gruchy expresses his belief that humanism need not be limited to this view. The alternate perspective, encouraged and affirmed by de Gruchy is a refreshingly honest approach, creating the space for new engagements and conversations between people and theology through the focus on humanity. But like the term 'humanism', there is no set understanding of what defines humanity. de Gruchy succinctly captures the development as he writes, 'our understanding of what it means to be human, and to be more fully so, has changed considerably over the centuries, shaped by our religious and philosophical traditions, refashioned by experience, exploration and experiment in ever changing contexts.'⁸⁷ Although most people would agree that there is something distinguishing about humans which places us in a category of our own, there is little consensus on what, precisely, that difference is. There are so many facets to each individual, the complexities and components of which have only been highlighted by the progress that has been made in the humanities and sciences. de Gruchy reiterates how Christian humanism accepts this common essence among people – even if it cannot be articulated – as it considers all people as equals, regardless of any diversity. de Gruchy also vehemently defends those who are sick, disabled or for some other reason have been treated as less deserving of the title, 'human'. He does this by demonstrating that if the criterion for 'humanity' is dependent on things such as perfect health or having never displayed any dependency or disabilities, no individual would meet that standard.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Long, E.T. 1989 Fall. *Christianity and Humanism. The Personalist Forum*, Is 2, Vol 5. p126.

⁸⁵ Falk, W.D. & W. Farrer. 1989 fall. *Humanism. Ibid.* Is Vol, 69-81. p73.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p70.

⁸⁷ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p6.

Christian humanism does not strip individuals of their culture and identity, even with a belief in a shared humanity and a common Creator. People are not expected to be clones of one another, and uniformity is not perceived as the ideal. In fact, diversity is considered as an enriching element within humanity, for as the differing characteristics of individuals and societies engage with each other, new depths and dimensions of life are reached. The various cultures' ethnicities, religions, genders, classes, ages, education levels, abilities – to name some of the more obvious differences – challenge, refine, inspire and teach each other as they interact.

The invitation to accept the beliefs of Christianity and the Christian humanist are open to everyone. During the early stages of the movement, the original Christians could not have anticipated the faith expanding across the globe as it has; not only because of their limited geographical knowledge, but also owing to the initial perception that Christianity could only encompass Jews into the faith. It was with Pentecost that Christians were compelled to actively go out and proclaim the good news of love and justice. But de Gruchy points out that it was only later, in Acts 9-10 that the Christians realised that the message that Jesus brought was intended for all of humanity, and therefore people from any context needed to be included.⁸⁹ Subsequent to this realisation, the New Testament Epistles teach about unity and reconciliation, epitomised in statements such as Galatians 3: 28, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

*2.4 On Earth as it is in Heaven*⁹⁰

de Gruchy, within the Christian humanist framework, demonstrates how the implications of Christianity are not restricted to issues of salvation and eschatology, which are primarily concerned with the 'last things,'⁹¹ death and eternal life. There is need for Christians to expand their focus, encompassing the present reality, as 'spiritual issues' are no longer considered to be isolated to matters directly related to religion.⁹² The incarnation of Christ is a testament to this, for God entered the world, becoming fully human, interacting with

⁸⁹ Ibid. p167.

⁹⁰ Matthew 6: 10

⁹¹ McGrath, A. 2007. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

⁹² de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

people in their contexts and dealing with the current issues.⁹³ Küng (1984: 68) is cited by de Gruchy, as saying, 'Being a Christian cannot mean ceasing to be human. But neither can being human mean ceasing to be Christian.'⁹⁴ de Gruchy shows the shift in mission, as previously, Christians sought to convert people to the faith, in order to secure their eternal lives. This focus is now changing to bringing about peace, love and justice in the present age, in an attempt to make the prayer, 'on Earth as it is in Heaven' a reality. An example of de Gruchy emphasising the necessity for Christians to pursue tangible outcomes can be seen as he writes, 'Making reparation for past injustices is not politically expedient; it's a spiritual obligation that has very practical outcomes.'⁹⁵

The verses, 1 John 4: 7-11,⁹⁶ describe the relationships between God and humanity, and subsequently how people should interact with each other. God, who is portrayed as the source of all love, demonstrates this love through the act of Christ's birth, death, resurrection and defeat of sin. Humanity is called to respond to this love, by requiring God's love as well as extending it to other people. de Gruchy points out that God showed his love through the actions of Christ, and then in turn asks Christians how they validate their love for God and each other.⁹⁷ This concept is repeated a little earlier in the letter of 1 John as it says, 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his love for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.'⁹⁸ Another example is in Matthew 25, where Jesus is recorded as saying, 'whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'⁹⁹. He goes on to explain that it is through such demonstrations that the doer of the good deeds shows that they know Jesus. There are a number of alternative verses which substantiate this concept, but they are too numerous to list here.¹⁰⁰ The Scripture cited in

⁹³ Ibid. p103.

⁹⁴ Küng, H. 1984. *On Being a Christian*. New York: Image Books Double Day. p601. In de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p142.

⁹⁵ ---. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p151.

⁹⁶ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

⁹⁷ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p140.

⁹⁸ 1 John 3: 16

⁹⁹ Matthew 25: 40

¹⁰⁰ Isaiah 1: 17, 'learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.' Jeremiah 22:3, 'This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.' And Matthew 23: 23, 'Woe to you, teachers of the

Confessions of a Christian Humanist, used to make this point is Micah 6:8 as it states the need for Christian action; 'And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'. The Bible emphasises the need to fight for justice and peace, especially on behalf of the poor.¹⁰¹ A Christian belief cannot be separated from the need to love others nor can it be isolated from a life committed to demonstrating that love.

Jesus himself, is shown to be a 'teacher and healer'¹⁰² throughout the Gospels as he fought against the injustices of the time, contesting those who were taking advantage of the vulnerable. de Gruchy illustrates this through a succinct summary of the Sermon on the Mount¹⁰³, in which Jesus challenges and instructs those listening to him as well as all who follow him;

[Jesus] encouraged them to seek justice and be peacemakers, to love others irrespective of their background; to forgive others far beyond what might normally be expected; to serve one another rather than claiming some preferred status, and so put God's reign first in their lives.¹⁰⁴

Jesus sought restoration for individuals and communities, including those who were outcast. No one was unworthy of Jesus' attention and energy; Jesus was even willing to touch those who had been deemed unclean and contagious by the religious and cultural beliefs of the time. Jesus constantly demonstrates sensitivity as he transcends the boundaries of the different faith groups, and the cultural practices of the various nationalities present in his time. It is intriguing to note how Jesus manages to integrate this approach with a deep reverence for the Old Testament Scriptures. By interpreting the Torah with the perspective that it is not the laws themselves that are important, but rather the belief that they are created to preserve life, Jesus manages to remain faithful to the Scriptures while breaking cultural and religious expectations. Jesus was interested in people's 'well-being.'¹⁰⁵

law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former'. And a final example from Mark 12:33, 'To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices'.

¹⁰¹ Groody, D.G. (ed). 2007. *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

¹⁰² de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p144.

¹⁰³ Matthew 5-7

¹⁰⁴ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p144.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

As Jesus sought full restoration for all whom he encountered as well as all those who believe in him, we too need to follow his example, and translate his behaviour to our interaction with the whole of humanity. de Gruchy understands the Bible not as a rule book, but as an instrument or guide to teach and instil values and principles, which can then be applied to the different scenarios which every Christian faces. The work of Christ is still applicable millennia later. de Gruchy adds to this, that it is unlikely that Christians' discernment and responses will ever be entirely faultless, and therefore we rely on God's Grace to account for any misconduct.¹⁰⁶

2.5 Acting in the Modern Day Context

In order for Christians to achieve the influence and reach that Jesus had, they not only need to be sensitive as they navigate around people's differences, but they also need to be relevant in order to meaningfully speak into specific contexts. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* is grounded in context as it is written in an autobiographical format; de Gruchy relates his memories and experiences in order to illustrate or re-iterate his points. After reflecting on a number of similar conversations with people who were apostate, having renounced their former religious beliefs, de Gruchy draws the conclusion that, 'there were many, who were disenchanted with a Christianity that seemed out of touch with the challenges, both intellectual and moral, that were facing us.'¹⁰⁷

Theologians and Christian humanists have to be familiar with the modern context in order to speak into it. As the knowledge of the universe is deepening and growing rapidly, theology needs to consider it all. By taking into account all the modern discoveries and advancements, and incorporating them into how God is understood, theology will remain relevant.¹⁰⁸ To those of the Christian faith, God is not simply a cop-out explanation for all the unexplainable situations in life, for if that was the case, God would be becoming increasingly irrelevant as science is systematically deciphering all the past mysteries.¹⁰⁹ To those in the Christian faith, God is a being, a deity, who interacts with the Earth and its population. It is necessary for individuals to understand this interaction, in order to determine how it is that they are to respond in situations. This process is important because it is through this

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p149.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p82.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p120.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p127.

dialogue of discerning and reacting to situations that people's humanity and identity are shaped. Areas where hurt and injustice have occurred deserve special attention for it is in these related events that greater formation takes place.¹¹⁰

This approach, which acknowledges a shared humanity, has not been adopted by everyone. There are many contexts where people do not adhere to these principles and the ideals which have been discussed are not respected. It is in these times that God's presence of justice and peace needs to be felt. There are times when individuals have discriminated against those who are not the same as they are and governing bodies have even enforced divisions between people along lines of 'difference', dismissing the humanist and Christian humanist approaches. The atrocities of the Holocaust and Apartheid are two well-known examples of the past century, but such behaviour is certainly not limited to them. de Gruchy suggests that as people become more exposed to the concept of dehumanisation, we will become more aware of the extent and frequency that it is taking place. He continues saying, that as people become more conscious of this issue and reality, that a renewed sense of justice will be aroused within Christians and all people, moving them to act against oppressive forces.¹¹¹ A number of behaviours and attitudes are named by de Gruchy as those which are expected from a Christian humanist:

Such a humanism, it is argued, must affirm both human dignity and obligation, seek to overcome past hatreds as well as present challenges that threaten human existence, accept others beyond national borders, be committed to the reconciliation of sameness and difference in the realm of law, and recognise both the risks and opportunities of the new global connectedness that we presently experience.¹¹²

2.6 The Honesty within Christian Humanism

There are many people who have grown frustrated and dissatisfied with Christianity and religion over the years as it has failed to provide answers for many questions which have been raised. The traditional view which has been perpetuated is that an unquestioning and accepting attitude is an indication of a person's full belief in, and commitment to, the faith. Little or no room has been allocated to exploring or interrogating Christian doctrine, prior

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p6.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p113.

¹¹² Ibid. p28-29.

interpretations of the Scriptures and the like. Yet through a careful reading of stories such as that of Job, the biblical character is no longer perceived as an example of someone happily, surrendering to the ills of life. Job 1: 21 is extracted and presented in support of this view, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.' But reading beyond this often-quoted verse, in the less familiar chapters of Job, 3-41, we find a character struggling to come to terms with the all that has happened. Job is recorded crying out in angst and asking God to account for the tribulations which have befallen him. Job rejects his friends' theological arguments which try to explain the tragedies, as they suggest that Job is 'reaping what he has sown' or that God is testing his faith. The book of Job concludes with God, not explaining the situation or replying to any questions, but simply presenting himself and affirming Job and his reactions, rather than the friends who appear to be more steadfast and devout.

The books of Job, Lamentations and the Psalms portray biblical characters with whom God engages as they wrestle with their faith in an attempt to understand it and come to terms with it, within the world that they live in. The principles of Christian humanism follow suit, as they engage honestly with the challenges and circumstances which people face. People are given the space to view scenarios and situations theologically and critically. Although having said this, the element of faith is not rejected by the Christian humanists; God and theology cannot be reduced to 'an intellectual exercise.'¹¹³ Just as in the book of Job, there are times when there are no adequate intellectual answers, and people can only become content with some of the questions and concerns that they have through a revelation of God from God.

de Gruchy not only demonstrates how critically and theologically engaging with issues is acceptable, but he also encourages it. Using a conversation he had with a South African army official as an illustration, de Gruchy shows the need to thoroughly think through any assumptions of the faith.¹¹⁴ The army officer claims God's support for their endeavours, as up until that point they had been victorious. But with a few simple questions, de Gruchy quickly shows the officer that his thinking cannot be substantiated. This illustration serves as an example and as a warning as to how religion can be falsely used to justify dangerous

¹¹³ Ibid. p119.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p124.

behaviour and how these questionable actions become evident with even the slightest interrogation.

This approach to life which acknowledges emotions, the realities of actual situations and allows room to question is characteristic not just of the Christian humanism but the whole humanism movement. Neilson poetically captures this attitude as he writes, 'it was the painters and sculptors who were the real humanists, for in their representations, they pictured man as they saw him.'¹¹⁵ The artworks reveal a familiarity with the subjects depicted as the subjects' weaknesses and short-comings were portrayed, as well as their beauty and strength. It is only as people's undeniable vulnerability – made particularly evident by the certainty of death – is honestly evaluated and acknowledged, that the extent needed to care for and protect humanity is fully realised. But coupled with this, is the realisation that people have the capacity to meet those needs.

One of the distinguishing features of the Christian Humanists' thinking is hope. This hope is understood, not as an idealistic and unattainable concept, but something that can and must be sought after in the current age. de Gruchy writes of hope, that it is 'not as resignation to an unjust world, but as a refusal to accept that this was what God wanted for humanity.'¹¹⁶ This hope is based on Jesus' death and resurrection, which has enabled people to enter into God's renewed plan for humanity. Members of the faith cannot be passive, ignorant or content with the areas in life where love, justice and peace are not present. Christians are expected to be active participants in realising God's desire for the Earth throughout the world.

2.7 Bonhoeffer

The German Pastor, Bonhoeffer, is an interesting example of a person who embodies the values of a Christian humanist for de Gruchy. Bonhoeffer was fully convinced of the value of being human and believed that the ultimate display of faith was to follow the example of the incarnate Christ, becoming fully human as God has created us to be.¹¹⁷ But when faced with the tragic reality of the Second World War, Bonhoeffer wrestled with his faith. As Hitler

¹¹⁵ Neilson, F. 1950 January. *Humanism, Yesterday and Today*. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Is 2, Vol 9, 177-189. p181.

¹¹⁶ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p105.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*. p149.

presented his teachings as being in accordance with God's will, Bonhoeffer struggled through the complex theological contradictions as he attempted to discern how to deal with the situation. Facing these tough questions, Bonhoeffer felt compelled not to simply detach himself from the situation, but rather he was convicted to act on behalf of the Jews, seeking practical measures to relieve the vulnerable people, who were being targeted and marginalised, from the oppressive forces.¹¹⁸ Through this it is evident that this man perceived it to be necessary to defend the humanity even of those outside his religious affiliation.

Bonhoeffer stands as an example of a person who embodies the elements of de Gruchy's Christian humanist; the main elements of this theological framework are that all people are understood to have inherent value, as they have been made in the image of God. And therefore, as Christ was incarnate and became fully human, to be Christian also means to be 'more fully human.'¹¹⁹ In response to this belief, people are to engage with each other in mutual love and respect, conducting themselves in a manner which affirms all life. Following the beliefs of being a Christian humanist, people accept an invitation to partner with God and God's plan for the World. From this, hope becomes a primary characteristic of Christian humanists, as God is revealed as relevant, speaking into areas of injustice and as Christians seek to bring about peace and reconciliation.

As can be seen through this chapter which has traced the developments of Christian humanism and outlined its pivotal features, there are many benefits to using Christian humanism as the theoretical framework which underlies this study. Christian humanism described by de Gruchy successfully constructs a way to critically engage with all the relevant facets of life, without undermining the element of faith important to believers. There is an emphasis on investigating accepted situations in order to discern whether they respect the value present within each person. This enquiring and critical nature of Christian humanism is also appropriate for this study because it analyses previously accepted beliefs and traditions. By asking the right questions, it challenges the church and society, especially in areas where a person's humanity is undermined. The research done into the Scripture passage of the Widow's Offering, relating it to the modern context and the assessing of how

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p189.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p31.

children engage with all of this, all directly adhere to the central beliefs of Christian humanism.

Chapter 3

The Widow's Offering: Mark 12: 41-44

The objective of this chapter is to explore how a critical reading of the Bible can extend the traditional readings present in Children's Bibles. The story of the Widow's Offering will be used as an example to contrast the different messages. A thorough exegesis will be conducted on the passage, and the meaning established from this investigation will be assessed by the principles of Christian humanism. These findings will then be compared to the message portrayed in Children's Bibles, in order to evaluate the different interpretations between the adult and children's translations.

The story recorded in chapter 12 of the Gospel of Mark, which tells of the Widow who gave her two coins as a Temple offering, is one that is familiar to many Christians. Throughout history it is an illustration that has been used as an example of selfless giving. This teaching is formulated as Jesus points out that even though the woman has given substantially less to the Temple than many others, by giving all that she has, she has given a greater portion of her wealth. The versions and teachings which follow this trajectory of thought appear to be the most well-known interpretations of the text as this perspective is reflected in the majority of the writing and commentaries surrounding the story. But there is an alternate view, which is extracted when the pericope is considered within the wider context of the chapter and Gospel.

King alludes to such a reading in his translation of the New Testament and commentary¹²⁰ as he draws the connection between Jesus' previous disapprovals of the leaders and 'scribes' throughout the Gospel, and the widow being used as an example to validate the judgments that Jesus has made against the leaders.¹²¹ The Ujamaa Centre has developed a Bible Study which raises a similar perspective, highlighting connections which are often over-looked, yet

¹²⁰ King, N. 2004. *The New Testament: Popular Edition*. Great Britain: Kevin Mayhew.

¹²¹ Some of the previous disapproving behaviour and remarks which King is referring to, can be seen in situations like Mark 2:6-11 where Jesus challenges the teachers of the law's thoughts as they consider him to be blasphemous. There are other times, such as Mark 2:23, 3:20-30 and 7:1-13 when Jesus answers the Pharisees, rebutting their attack, on various issues. Another example is seen in Mark 8:15, when Jesus warns against the Pharisees.

revealing a different interpretation of the text when they are considered.¹²² After an in depth analysis of the selected texts, it emerges that the new message discovered from re-visiting the familiar passage of Scripture is one which is in line with the ideals of Christian humanism.

3.1 Traditional Reading of Mark 12: 41-44

The story of the Widow's offering in Mark 12: 41-44 shows Jesus sitting down at a place in the Temple where he can observe the individuals as they each put their tithes and offerings into the treasury. Reference is made by the author to the varying amounts that are contributed to the Temple and attention is drawn to the wealthy people who leave behind fairly substantial offerings, and then to a lone widow who appears to make a very small offering in comparison. Jesus then gathers his disciples around him to teach them, using the woman as an example. In his illustration, Jesus commends the woman and the spirit in which she gave her offering, as he says, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.'¹²³ The woman had the option of only giving one of her coins, yet she gave both¹²⁴, which corresponds with the example set by Jesus' own life and actions: just as the widow gives everything that she has, so too does Jesus give his life as a sacrifice.¹²⁵ Traditionally, the principles and messages embedded within the passage are then discerned by Christians and listeners in order that the teaching can be translated and implemented into their own lives. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, the passage of the Widow's Offering has been interpreted and used, as an example of selfless giving. Numerous other teachings have been inferred from this story, a number of which Wright has collected and listed as follows;

1. The point of Jesus' commendation is that the true measure of gifts is not how much is given but how much remains behind or that the measure of the gifts is the percentage of one's means which the gift represents, and/or that the true measure of gifts is the self-denial involved, the cost for the giver.

¹²² The Bible Study referred to can be found in, West, G.O. Draft November 2007. *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*. Produced by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development and Research. p18-25.

¹²³ Mark 12: 41-44 (NIV)

¹²⁴ France, R.T. 2002. *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press. p20.

¹²⁵ Marcus, J. 2009. *Mark 8 - 16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. p862. Mark 10:45 and 14:22, 24 are cross-references for this.

2. The point of Jesus' commendation is that it is not the amount which one gives that matters but the spirit in which the gift is given. When specified, that spirit is variously seen as self-offering, self-forgetfulness, unquestioning surrender, total commitment, loyalty and devotion to God's call, gratitude, generosity, humility and unobtrusiveness, trust in God to provide for one's needs, detachment from possessions.
3. The point of the story is that the true gift is to give everything we have.
4. The moral of the story is that alms and other pious gifts should correspond with one's means.
5. Perhaps the story was used to indicate the duty of almsgiving.¹²⁶

This list is not exhaustive. For example, a message can be drawn out as the word for 'life' included in 'all she had to live on' is βίον, coming from the word βίος which does not refer to every aspect of life, but more specifically the physical or tangible facets of a person's life.¹²⁷ Further messages, principles and warnings are exposed through a broader exegesis which takes into consideration the nature of Gospels, the Gospel of Mark as a whole, as well as the context of first century Palestine from within which the Gospel was written.

3.2 Mark and the Context of the Widow's Offering.

Intertextual Criticism suggests that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written. Varied evidence supports this deduction, but two proofs are considered to be the most telling. Firstly, Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the Synoptic Gospels and it is generally accepted that it is more likely for a redacting author to expand a text than to discard sections of it. This is because editors usually seek to explain and clarify particular issues and concerns which hearers or readers may have had. Secondly, through an analysis of where Matthew, Mark and Luke are in agreement. Where the same stories or phrases appear in all three of the Gospels, the Gospels' of Matthew and Luke are only in agreement where they correlate with Mark, suggesting that they both used Mark's Gospel as a source text.¹²⁸ Despite scholars being in agreement over the priority of Mark, there is little consensus over who exactly the author, traditionally known as Mark, was, or whether the gospel was written before or after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE, and lastly, where the gospel was written.

¹²⁶ Wright, A.G. 1982. *The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament? A Matter of Context*. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Washington, D.C., Is 2, Vol 44, 256-265.

¹²⁷ Plummer, A. 1914. *The Gospel According to Mark*. London: Cambridge University Press. p290.

¹²⁸ Barclay, W. 1976. *The Gospels & Acts*. Great Britain: SCM. p82-90.

Van Iersel explains that in order to 'try to explain Mark as a coherent whole of meanings'¹²⁹ it is important that the reader knows which context the Gospel was written in, and to whom it was intended. Knowing these answers would influence and determine how the Gospel was understood and interpreted. Yet the author of the first Gospel never introduces himself, nor does he explain or state his context.¹³⁰ There is also little reference made to specific places or events from which the reader can deduce its origins with any certainty. There are a few details which may offer slight clues, directing readers in a possible direction.¹³¹ Despite the detail and depth of the discussions surrounding the authorship, date, and place of writing, due to limited space within this study, only a brief overview will be given.

Traditionally the Gospel is ascribed to Peter's interpreter, Mark and believed to have been penned in Rome. This perspective was supported by the presence of 'Latinisms' in Mark, indicating a Roman influence, although even this is not conclusive, as Latin terminology is present in literature from across the Roman-occupied territory.¹³² The theme of persecutions which runs throughout the text, can be perceived as a reference to Nero's attack of the Roman Christians in defence of his name. Alternatively the persecutions can be read as alluding to the Syrian persecution of the Jews, which included Christians. More evidence has emerged which suggests Syria as a possible, alternative setting, owing to the 'Aramaisms' within the text and because the style of writing has a 'Palestinian-Syrian colour'¹³³ to them. Further indicators would be the reference to Lake Galilee as a 'sea', which suggests that the author has never seen the Mediterranean, although this too is not conclusive as other literary sources can account for the use of this terminology even if this is not the case. And the final suggestion of Galilee has quickly been dismissed, for the author of Mark does not describe the Palestinian landscape as it is, making it unlikely that it was the place where the Gospel was written from.

¹²⁹ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p32.

¹³⁰ It can be assumed that the author was a man, as women in first century Palestine were illiterate. Metzger, B.M. 1965. *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*. Nashville: Abingdon.

¹³¹ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p31-49.

¹³² Ibid. p33-40.

¹³³ Ibid. p36.

There is general consensus among Biblical Scholars that Mark's Gospel was written somewhere between 65 CE and just after 70CE.¹³⁴ This approximation of ten years may seem insignificant to some readers who are unaware of the significant destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Emperor Nero. The theological implications associated with whether the author wrote the Gospel in light of the invasion or not, are substantial. Mark 13: 2 has been used to support the arguments that advocate the theory which states that the destruction of the Temple has already taken place. But it seems unlikely that this reference, 'Not one stone here will be left on another, every one will be thrown down'¹³⁵, is one made in hindsight, for it seems absurd that such a disastrous event would not warrant more than such a fleeting mention. The references to 'war' (πονηλεμος) are never used in the singular, suggesting that the references are not being made to any specific war. There are many other, brief references and allusions which can be interpreted as indicators as to when the Gospel was written, but considering the more obvious elements, I would maintain that the stronger argument is that Mark was written before the destruction of the Temple in 70CE. Van Iersel concludes, stating that even though the time of writing cannot be decided with any certainty, 'there is little doubt that the Gospel was read by Roman Christians in the seventies.'¹³⁶ Being aware of this while engaging with the Gospel of Mark can lead to greater insight into what the first reactions to the Gospel by the Christian audience may have been.

3.3 Society Structure

Society in first Century Palestine was constructed in a relatively uncomplicated way. Like other 'ancient, agrarian societies'¹³⁷, the wealthy minority ruled over the vast majority of the population. Even though the peasants comprised ninety percent of the population, there was no middle or working class, and therefore no means of bridging the social strata. Because of this, the leaders had a comfortable monopoly over all elements of society – such as the military, political and economic spheres – and were free to structure society as they pleased.¹³⁸ The ruling class exploited the peasants in order to support their opulent lifestyles. By imposing various taxes, demanding rent, and tributes the self-sustaining farmers were forced to produce an excess in order to meet the requirements placed on

¹³⁴ Ibid. p31, 42-43, 46-49.

¹³⁵ Mark 13:2 NIVS

¹³⁶ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p49.

¹³⁷ Horsley, R.A. 1994. *Sociology and the Jesus Movement: Second Edition*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.

¹³⁸ Esler, P.F. 2000. *The Early Christian World*. London: Routledge. p114-17.

them.¹³⁹ This perpetuated a circle of control, as the peasants provided the rulers with the means to retain the military and artisans who could then enforce the payments of taxes and tributes.

The tax system was a complicated one as different layers of separate taxes were added and imposed on the peasants throughout the ages.¹⁴⁰ Since the Assyrian Conquest in 722 BCE, the Palestinian people were perpetually subjected to paying taxes to the succession of foreign emperors who ruled over Israel. The people of Palestine were required to pay a further tax to the temple when the Persian imperial policy was implemented, as it allowed local rule under the banner of the Persian Empire. Although the tribute tax given to the temple was fundamentally religiously motivated, it inadvertently funded the religious leaders' 'power and privilege.'¹⁴¹ Yet the temple did not have complete liberty over their actions, for they still had to show their allegiance and cooperation to the Imperial regime, in order to maintain the ruling empires' consent to rule. Finally, a third tax was introduced to the system, when the Herodian kings were instated as the governing authorities, alongside the Temple rulers. There was increased pressure on the peasantry to produce enough to support the expansion of the ruling class, yet the peasantry received little support and compensation from the state for paying their taxes.

The structure of the tax system indicates a number of underlying features which are pivotal to understanding the way society functioned in first century Palestine. The first being that the few, rich rulers supported their luxurious lifestyles by exploiting the peasants who made up the majority of the population. The second point to note is how intertwined the different aspects of life are. No distinctions were made between the religious, political and economic factions of life, and therefore, unlike in modern society, the rulers influence every facet of society. The implications of this are that, unlike the modern era, the power over all factions of life was concentrated in a small, central – unchallenged – authority. Of the temple, Horsley then deduces that 'the Temple and high priesthood were not merely religious

¹³⁹ Horsley, R.A. 1994. *Sociology and the Jesus Movement: Second Edition*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company. p69-70.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p71.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p73.

institutions, but economic and political as well. Indeed the religious dimension served to legitimate the political-economic aspects of the Temple and high Priesthood.¹⁴²

Tribute taxes were not the only means by which the Temple financially exploited the people. The religious leaders stipulated that the animals which were to be brought for the ritual sacrifices had to have been purchased from the Temple. This requirement meant that, not only could the sacrificial animals not be selected out of the peasants' homesteads, but that the priests could charge exorbitant amounts for the livestock which the peasants would be obliged to pay as there were no alternative options to purchase. One final exacerbating practice of the religious leaders was before the animals could be bought, the peasants would have to exchange their money into the temple currency. This practice was again justified by religious beliefs, for it was a means of ensuring that only pure and ritually clean money entered into the temple system. Again, the priests having the monopoly on the temple currency could set the exchange rate at whatever price they desired. It is for this reason that in Mark 11 we see Jesus 'overturn the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves'¹⁴³ as he accused the religious leaders of turning the temple into 'a den of robbers.'¹⁴⁴

3.4 The Marginalised

Society, as discussed, was segregated into the privileged few at the top end of the social strata and the vast majority at the poorer, bottom end. But even within these groups there were further sub-divides. Ethnicity, landownership, slave or free person, and gender, among others, were influencing factors in a person's position within the hierarchy. For example, men were considered to be superior to women and children. Women were predominantly dependant on men, and a woman's status was determined by and parallel to that of her relatives: initially her father's and later her husband's.¹⁴⁵ Therefore when a woman was widowed, particularly the poorer women, their situation would deteriorate drastically. The Torah demonstrates God's awareness of the desperate situations of the poor and marginalised in verses such as Deuteronomy 10:18, which says, '[God] defends the cause of

¹⁴² Ibid. p72.

¹⁴³ Mark 11: 15 NIV

¹⁴⁴ Mark 11: 17 NIV

¹⁴⁵ Stegemann, E.W. & W.S. Stegemann. 1995. *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p66.

the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.’ Another illustration is that the plot within the book of Ruth is created around three widows and the necessary actions which they take to ensure their survival.¹⁴⁶ The Old Testament instruction to look after those who did not have access to the typical support structure, extended not just to widows, but to anyone who was vulnerable, including orphans, foreigners, and those who were destitute. Yet the laws and examples within the Torah, which instructed people to take care of those who were vulnerable, appear to have seldom been converted from theory into practise.¹⁴⁷ The governing authorities, including even the religious leaders, had been selfish, satisfying their own desires, whilst neglecting their responsibility of helping to provide for the needs of others who lacked the basics.¹⁴⁸

The manner in which the Gospel writers record and portray Jesus’ constant engagement and defence of the poor and marginalised, demonstrates that Jesus was no idealist.¹⁴⁹ Aware of the different social strata of society, Jesus acknowledges the varied experiences that each of the class levels face. This is further emphasised when it is contrasted with the other texts written in a similar time, which barely make any reference to those who are not leaders or among the elite; demonstrating the little regard held for the majority who were perceived as being on the lower end of society, as the wealthy and educated people considered the others insignificant.

3.5 Conflict and Leadership

The theme of conflict is one that emerges constantly throughout the Gospel of Mark, building the momentum of the plot.¹⁵⁰ The encounters occur on a variety of different planes within the text. God and Jesus have disputes and disagreements with other individuals, groups and supernatural forces which were unrightfully making ‘claims to power and authority.’¹⁵¹ Jesus also vehemently questions the way in which the Jewish Scriptures have

¹⁴⁶ Coxon, P.W. 1989. *Was Naomi a Scold? A Response to Fewell and Gunn. Journal for the Society of the Old Testament*, Is Vol 45, 26-27.

¹⁴⁷ Esler, P.F. 2000. *The Early Christian World*. London: Routledge. p129.

¹⁴⁸ Stegemann, E.W. & W.S. Stegemann. 1995. *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p124-25.

¹⁴⁹ Esler, P.F. 2000. *The Early Christian World*. London: Routledge. p114, 121.

¹⁵⁰ Malbon, E.S. 1992. *Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?* In *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. J. C. Anderson & S. D. Moore. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p33.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

been interpreted and challenges the perception of who the Messiah was expected to be. And finally, tension is expressed through the different expectations of Jesus and his disciples.

The Sanhedrin was the ultimate legal and governing body, concerning issues of law, in the Jerusalem around the time of Jesus. The extent of the authority granted to this supreme council was dictated by the ruling monarch or empire.¹⁵² During the first century in Palestine, the Roman authorities remained fairly detached, allowing the Sanhedrin to rule all religious and civil matters, with the only restricting requirement being that they do not oppose any of the Roman laws. The Sanhedrin was comprised of various different members who performed a variety of functions; the high priests, the elders and the scribes. The scribes were religious leaders who were able to read and write. Because literacy was a scarce skill, the scribes were allocated the responsibility and function of developing and interpreting the law contained within the Torah and ancient texts. The Hebrew Scriptures and the sacred mosaic law were the fundamental documents which dictated the principles and laws which the Jewish people adhered to and based their society around. The predominantly illiterate populations were dependant on the scribes to teach and convey all that had been gleaned, in order to know what practises, traditions and lifestyle was expected from them.¹⁵³ Owing to their superior knowledge of the laws, the scribes were entrusted with making judgements on any legal issues. It is from these various practices that the scribes were also known as ‘teachers of the law’ and held in such high regard.

Mark and Jesus’ attitude and opinion of the Scribes is slowly revealed throughout the Gospel. The first mention of the scribes in Mark’s Gospel implies that they do not speak with ‘authority’¹⁵⁴ as their teaching is contrasted against Jesus’. In Mark 2 verses 6 and 16 and 7: 1-5, the readers’ respect towards the scribes is again undermined, as Mark records their thoughts and discussions with the disciples which demonstrate a hostility towards Jesus, because of their own misunderstandings and false accusations. It is not just Jesus who is seen disagreeing with the scribes, for Jesus’ disciples are also seen in contentious disputes with the teachers of the law.¹⁵⁵ Jesus and Mark reveal how the teachers of the law feel

¹⁵² Metzger, B.M. 1965. *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*. Nashville: Abingdon. p52.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p47-48.

¹⁵⁴ Mark 1: 21 NIV

¹⁵⁵ Mark 9:14

threatened by Jesus' teachings and that their reaction is to devise a plan to kill him.¹⁵⁶ Within Mark, there is one instance where a scribe is presented in a positive light, as the scribe recognises the authority and insight which Jesus is teaching with and actively engages with Jesus by asking a question and interpreting the answer.¹⁵⁷ Jesus then acknowledges that the scribe's response demonstrates wisdom. Although this interaction is positive, it continues to emphasise the opinion of the scribes projected throughout the Gospel, as the reader is aware that the scribe that Jesus acknowledges and affirms is distinctly different from the other scribes. This contrast is even further accentuated as the conversation quietens the scribes. Mark's last mention of the scribes before they are seen binding Jesus in order to be tried and crucified¹⁵⁸ and mocking him with the other religious leaders¹⁵⁹, is in the text surrounding the Widow's Offering. Jesus is quite pointed as he warns people against the scribes who exploit the vulnerable in order to satisfy their own selfish desires. Although it is this passage of Mark that a fuller exegesis will be conducted on, it is still important to bare in mind the perception of the scribes, portrayed in the broader context by the author Mark and Jesus.

3.6 The Gospels

The majority of the societies in the first centuries of the Common Era still predominantly made use of the oral traditions and customs, as the number of literate people were still limited and writing resources were scarce. Within all oral communities, stories have been used as an effective means to ensure that history and knowledge has been conveyed from one person or generation to another.¹⁶⁰ The rhetorical practices and techniques were developed, and narratives were carefully constructed, in order to ensure that the narrative is remembered and relayed precisely. The authors of the New Testament Gospels and Epistles would have had an implied reader in mind, and would have assumed that the texts which they wrote would be read aloud to a congregation or audience, and therefore many of the same oral techniques were utilised.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Mark 10: 33; 11:18, 27.

¹⁵⁷ Mark 12:28-34, Plummer, A. 1914. *The Gospel According to Mark*. London: Cambridge University Press. p283.

¹⁵⁸ Mark 15: 1

¹⁵⁹ Mark 15: 31

¹⁶⁰ France, R.T. 2002. *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press. p9.

¹⁶¹ Malbon, E.S. 1992. *Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?* In *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. J. C. Anderson & S. D. Moore. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p26.

Using the different methods of Textual and Source Criticism, general consensus has been reached that Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written. The Gospels, as well as some of the letters are understood to be compositions of various stories, songs and traditions, yet the Gospel writers were not merely historians who intended to simply reproduce and preserve the stories that they had collected.¹⁶² They were theologians, and writing the Gospel was a tool which would form and relay their theological insights to others. The Gospels bring the separate elements together into a single narrative, which initially seems to be simply compiled chronologically. But it is revealed through a closer reading of the text and by using the method of redaction criticism, which investigates the way in which the original sources are edited and joined, that these individual units of tradition are stitched together with a more theological motive. Each Gospel author has carefully composed the text, deliberately arranging individual pericopes, in order to convey specific themes or teachings which are emphasised, expanded and supported by the rest of the body of writing. By identifying the separate sources, insight into the author's theology can be gleaned by noting the order and manner in which they are combined as well as the way in which the different stories and teachings interact with each other.

It is important to consider each Gospel as a whole. The authors' penned the Gospels and New Testament letters with the expectation that they would have been performed for an audience, by being read or recited aloud from start to finish. The overall structure and the themes which are threaded throughout the Gospel are more easily picked up on by following this original practise, as opposed to the current practises of reading the Bible in smaller portions.¹⁶³ The insertion of the chapters and verses by Eusebius in the fourth century CE can be rather misleading.¹⁶⁴ The reference points have been helpful for readers as it divides the Scriptures into what appear to be natural breaks and stories, which enables specific texts to easily be located and directs the readers' reading. But the problem with this is that it has often resulted in people reading short passages and verses in isolation. By separating the reading from the rest of the body of text, the intended message may be distorted, and a misguided teaching or the wrong emphasis may be given. Allusions which have been drawn

¹⁶² Barclay, W. 1976. *The Gospels & Acts*. Great Britain: SCM. van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p26.

¹⁶³ ---. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p71.

¹⁶⁴ Hazlett. 1991. *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to AD 600*. London: SPCK. p86.

throughout the text may be overlooked and then may inform a different understanding of the Scripture.

There are many common practices which demonstrate how the Bible is read and interpreted in isolated portions; Bible reading plans, devotionals and sermons to name but a few. Bible reading plans are designed as an aid to direct those who intend to read the Bible in a year, by suggesting which portion of Scripture should be read each day. Many of the reading plans alternate between the Books and Testaments from day to day, rather than suggesting that the chapters be read in the order that they appear in the Canon.¹⁶⁵ The structure and style of the modern day sermon epitomises this practice of a 'micro-exegesis'¹⁶⁶ segmenting the Bible, as a portion of Scripture is selected either by the preacher or dictated by a lectionary, and a message is devised and extracted from that particular text. In many instances, little or no consultation is been made with surrounding Scriptures or sources by the listening congregations – or at times it appears, even the preacher! Many devotional books follow a similar format to the sermons as they expand on a single passage or even verse.¹⁶⁷ There is some merit to concentrating on a specific portion as it can enable a reader to gain a greater depth of insight in some situations, yet this 'exegesis on the lowest text level'¹⁶⁸ cannot be the sole method of biblical exegesis. In order to discern the author's intention and message and develop a fuller understanding of the message and text as a whole, it is important for readers not to remain ignorant of the socio-historical and literary context from which the Scriptures come. The focus text of this study, Mark 12: 41-44, becomes a primary example of this as it demonstrates how reading the text as an independent piece of writing can evoke a different message and emphases, compared to when it is interpreted in light of the whole Gospel and an understanding of the culture at the time.

3.7 *The Gospel of Mark*

The first of the Gospels is written as one continuous story, although there is movement within it. The author begins with an introduction, with the narrative then moving to Galilee

¹⁶⁵ Bible, Study Tools. *Chronological New Testament*. <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-reading-plan/chronological-new-testament.html>>. 15 November 2012. and Bibleyear.Com. 2012. *Read the Bible in a Year*. <<http://www.ewordtoday.com/year/niv1984/cjan01.htm>>. 15 November 2012. are two examples.

¹⁶⁶ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p15.

¹⁶⁷ Chambers, O. 1935. *My Utmost for His Highest*. Grand Rapids, USA: Discovery House Publishers. and Moran, X. 2007. *The Reason for Me*. Winterton: Red Letter Design and Publishing. are two examples of devotional books which do this.

¹⁶⁸ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p15.

as Jesus begins to minister, and then to Jerusalem where the pace of the plot quickens, climaxing at the Crucifixion, before the final conclusion.¹⁶⁹ Expanded conclusions have been subsequently been added to the Gospel. It is interesting to note that Mark does not begin as the other two synoptic Gospels do – with the birth of Jesus – but that he begins with Jesus’ baptism, which signals the start of his public ministry.

The Gospel has been carefully constructed by Mark as a means of guiding the hearers and readers through the narrative, in order that themes can be developed and remembered. Van Iersel divides the Gospel, showing how the different segments are mirrored around a central point in ‘concentric circles’¹⁷⁰:

a) Jesus proclaims his message in Galilee	1.14 - 8:21
b) Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida	8: 22-26
c) Jesus is with the disciples on the way	8: 27 – 10: 45
b) Jesus heals a blind man in Jericho	10: 46-52
a) Jesus is executed in Jerusalem	11: 1 – 15:? ¹⁷¹

The two locations of Galilee and Jerusalem help to direct the reader through the story. Not only do they provide the setting for the narrative, but each place carries with it a number of connotations which are in stark contrast to each other. Galilee is a slightly more rural area of the country, with a number of synagogues while Jerusalem is the epicentre of the country, with only one Temple. The nature of locations dictates where people will choose to inhabit therefore people who produce a living off the land and tax-collectors resided in Galilee, while the Temple leaders and scribes lived in Jerusalem. The section c) which van Iersel describes as ‘on the way’ refers to the period between Galilee and Jerusalem, and is framed by stories of men who miraculously receive their sight. Two plots which meet at Jesus’ resurrection can be seen threading through this composition. Jesus’ public encounters and opposition against the authorities follows one strand, with the other plot documenting the disciples and followers’ journey to discovering and comprehending exactly who Jesus is, and what the implications of this are.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p77.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 80

¹⁷¹ Through the use of a question mark, van Iersel has avoided making a comment regarding the three possible endings of the Gospel of Mark. Deciding on the validity of each is unimportant for the purpose of this structure.

¹⁷² van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p69.

3.8 'Sandwich Construction'

One of the techniques which Mark uses throughout his Gospel has come to be known as the 'sandwich construction.'¹⁷³ The name of this literary tool is very descriptive, as Mark will often insert a story between another one, in the same way that the filling of a sandwich is put between the two slices of bread. This is not done at random, but is intentionally constructed in order for the reader to interpret the stories in light of each other. During the early years of Christianity, people would have become increasingly familiar with the Gospel's story and structure, as it would have been told repeatedly.¹⁷⁴ Therefore the hearers and readers would be aware of the storyline, and conscious of where each story fitted into the context of the Gospel as a whole. It is because of this practise that the initial hearers and readers of the Gospels would have been more aware of the literary techniques like the 'sandwich construction.'¹⁷⁵ One of the most obvious examples of this in Mark is in Chapter 5 where Jairus approaches Jesus, with the request that he heal his daughter. While en route to the synagogue leader's house, the story is interrupted by a haemorrhaging woman who is healed as she touches Jesus' cloak. After Jesus has addressed the woman the discourse and focus returns to the sick daughter as some of Jairus' household come to Jesus relaying the message that the little girl has passed away and that he need not bother coming to the house anymore. Jesus, disregarding the message, continues on to the house where he encounters and heals the little girl. The value of structuring the narrative in a 'sandwich construction' is seen because the message which Mark is trying to portray is emphasised and developed as the hearer or reader recognises the similarities within the text.

There are a number of parallels between these juxtaposing passages; the subject of women, the mention of 12 years¹⁷⁶ and the healing touch are more obvious ones. The basis of the plot is duplicated, as each healing story begins with the description of a problem, the severity of which is then heightened and reinforced, then there is a display of incredible

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p71-72. France, R.T. 2002. *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press. p16.

¹⁷⁵ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p25.

¹⁷⁶ Malbon suggests that the dual reference to 'twelve' not only connects the two stories, but also emphasises the 'Jewish flavour' of the text as the number symbolises Israel. This interpretation would support Draper's reading of the text, which is briefly described in the remainder of the paragraph. Malbon, E.S. 1992. *Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?* In *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. J. C. Anderson & S. D. Moore. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p31.

faith, the healing touch of Jesus, the mocking reactions of the onlookers, and finally Jesus' declaration of healing.¹⁷⁷ These similarities can be recognised by those reading or listening to the Gospel using basic literary criticism tools. There are other commonalities between the two stories which are only accessible to those who are familiar with the cultures and customs of first century Palestine. To uncover these, one has to go beyond the confines of the text. Those writing the texts would have assumed that the readers or hearers were familiar with these external factors as the intended readers were immersed in the same time and traditions as the authors.¹⁷⁸ Draper explores this in his article, *Jesus, Purity, Stigma and Healing from a South African Perspective*¹⁷⁹, as he shows how both women would have been excluded from society due to the ritual purity laws which are a part of Jewish custom, and it is Jesus who provides the opportunity for them to be incorporated back into society. It can be seen how, by re-iterating similar themes, the author directs the reader to the point that he is making, highlighting and confirming his message. In the same way, the passages surrounding the story of the Widow's Offering may indicate a slightly different message from the author, than that which has traditionally been taught.

3.9 Mark 12: 38 – 13: 2

As previously mentioned, the story of the Widow's Mite or Offering is usually read in isolation. Readers or hearers of this narrative will perceive stories of 'faithful giving, sacrificial giving, the importance of the right motives in giving, how the poor tend to give more proportionally [to their income] than the rich, and other similar responses.'¹⁸⁰ Yet the Ujamaa Centre uses this piece of Scripture as a tool to open discussions, create awareness and teach people about the shortfalls and failings of systems and institutions. By reading the passage in the socio-historical context and its literary context, including a reading of two verses before the pericope and two verses after it, what it understood as the meaning of the text can be significantly altered.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p50.

¹⁷⁸ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p23.

¹⁷⁹ Draper, J.A. 2003. *Jesus, Purity, Stigma and Healing from a South African Perspective*. In *International Network in Advanced Theological Education: Discovering Jesus in Our Place: Contextual Christologies in a Globalised World*, ed. S. J. Stalsett. Delhi: ISPCK.

¹⁸⁰ West, G.O. Draft November 2007. *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*. Produced by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development and Research. p19.

In Mark 12: 38-40 Jesus is quoted issuing a strong condemnation, directly against the scribes. It appears that the author of Mark has specifically chosen and recorded this segment of speech from all that Jesus was teaching at this time.¹⁸¹ The choice of the word, στολαίς, meaning 'robe', contributes to the perception of the scribes, as these robes were associated with honourable people. Πρωτοκαθεδρίας and πρωτοκλισίας, translated as 'most important seats' and 'places of honour' respectively were both the prime seats and places, and again, associated only with the most distinguished of people. The word κατεσθίοντες is translated 'devour', yet *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*¹⁸² suggests that 'to make prey of' or 'plunder' is a better translation for this particular verse. Whichever way it is translated, it is a strong, emotive word, used by Jesus and Mark to emphasize the unrestrained, vicious and destructive behaviour of the scribes. This condemnation is in line with the Torah's teaching in Deuteronomy 27: 19, 'Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, orphan or the widow'. But Plummer suggests that Jesus pronounces the most severe judgment on the scribes because they have not only taken advantage of the poor, but have used religion and deliberated projected themselves as righteous, in order to exploit people as much as possible. This is not the first time that Mark has portrayed Jesus making such a declaration. Earlier in the text Jesus is seen quoting from the prophet Isaiah¹⁸³ in Mark 7: 6-7, condemning the religious hypocrites.

There are more contrasts created within Mark 12: 41-42, as the scenario at the Temple treasury plays out. A greater distinction is drawn between the rich and the poor as different cases of the word 'many', or πολλοί and πολλὰν, is repeated in reference to the rich people, while the idea of a few or small is highlighted as there is only *one*, μία, widow who gave only two, δύο, of the smallest coins.¹⁸⁴ There are a number of other connections between Mark 12: 38-40 and Mark 12: 41-44; within each part of the story, reference is made to those in the upper strata of society and contrasted against those at the bottom.¹⁸⁵ Within the first part of the narrative, the wealthy religious leaders are shown leading a grand life, at the

¹⁸¹ Plummer, A. 1914. *The Gospel According to Mark*. London: Cambridge University Press. p288.

¹⁸² 1990. *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*. ed. W. J. Perschbacher. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers. p231.

¹⁸³ Isaiah 29: 13: 'The Lord says, 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.'

¹⁸⁴ Marcus, J. 2009. *Mark 8 - 16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. p860.

¹⁸⁵ West, G.O. Draft November 2007. *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*. Produced by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development and Research. p 19.

expense of the vulnerable widows. Then, almost as evidence of Jesus' statement, we see an example of the Temple being funded at the expense of the poor widow. In both of these instances, Jesus critiques the accepted circumstances, challenging people to alter their perceptions. As Jesus makes his judgement, he is seen taking the side of the poor and vulnerable.

The suggestion that the author of Mark is making a critique of the dynamics between the rich, poor, powerful, and powerless is further emphasised as the reader incorporates Mark 13:1-2 into their reading of the Widow's offering.¹⁸⁶ As the disciples and Jesus are leaving the Temple, after Jesus' teaching surrounding the widow's offering, one of the disciples expresses his awe at the beautiful and impressive structures. Jesus' responds in an unexpected way, for one who 'teaches in the temple courts'¹⁸⁷, as he predicts the deliberate destruction of the Temple. Jesus' response is confident, with the certainty of his claim being emphasised as, unlike anywhere else in the Gospels, Mark uses 'οὐ μή'¹⁸⁸ twice in the same sentence.¹⁸⁹ The links between the Temple and Jesus' unexpected judgement enable for the latter episode to be a continuation of Jesus' initial teaching.

Interrogating the text through literary criticism only affirms this perspective. For throughout the Gospel Mark is seen creatively using narrative techniques like various genres, setting, and pace as a means of making natural breaks within the story and groupings of ideas and stories within the plot. Therefore, in this instance, certain settings are not only symbolic¹⁹⁰ but they are used to differentiate between various sections of the text.¹⁹¹ This challenges the traditional division of chapter 12 and 13 of Mark. The first two verses of Chapter 13 have usually been included under the headings such as 'Signs of the End of the Age'¹⁹² and 'The coming destruction'¹⁹³, yet the characters are at the Temple site from Mark 11:27 right until

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. p20.

¹⁸⁷ Mark 12: 35

¹⁸⁸ Emphatic double negative

¹⁸⁹ Plummer, A. 1914. *The Gospel According to Mark*. London: Cambridge University Press. p293.

¹⁹⁰ Malbon describes how the author of the Gospel of Mark uses setting symbolically. An example of this is how the tops of hill are representative of places where God meets with his leaders and how Mark alludes to such a hilltop when he wants to emphasise the theophany experienced by the designated leader. Malbon, E.S. 1992. *Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?* In *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. J. C. Anderson & S. D. Moore. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p31.

¹⁹¹ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. p73.

¹⁹² 1995b. *The NIV study Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

¹⁹³ King, N. 2004. *The New Testament: Popular Edition*. Great Britain: Kevin Mayhew. p112.

Mark 13:2. It is only in Mark 13:3 that we notice the next change in location as Jesus moves to the 'Mount of Olives which is opposite the Temple'.¹⁹⁴ But even here, there is no definite break, as Jesus and the disciples are still in the vicinity of the Temple, and the conversation that follows has stemmed from Jesus' statement about the destruction of the Temple.

After conducting a thorough exegesis of the Gospel of Mark, focusing particularly on the story of the Widow's Offering and surrounding stories, a new interpretation emerges which can be added to the more traditional understanding of the text. As the Gospel is read within its socio-historical and literary context, Jesus is seen as presenting a dual message. Firstly the importance of the motivation and heart behind each individual's generosity is affirmed and a warning is also issued to the leaders – and particularly the religious authorities – against exploiting the vulnerable people of society. Both of these teachings are present simultaneously.¹⁹⁵ The carefully constructed narrative of Mark's Gospel, shows how the disciples' perspective of the Temple and leaders is challenged by Jesus, which in turn challenges the readers understanding of the Bible. This message contained within Mark, advocates the ideals of Christian humanism and can be used as a useful tool for teaching and engaging with pertinent issues within our modern society. This concept will be explored in the coming chapters.

3.10 Christian Humanism within the Story of the Widow's Offering

The understanding of a Christian humanist developed by de Gruchy is a theological framework which captures the message of Jesus in a way that is relevant in the modern world, as it seeks to address many of the injustices that people experience. Hope emerges, as the concerns are challenged, and peace and security is established in people's lives. A thorough exegesis of the Widow's Offering and the surrounding texts, reveal various messages and teachings which are in parallel with de Gruchy's description of Christian humanism described above. In fact, both the message in the traditional reading of the Widow's Offering and the new interpretation of the story are represented by this theological perspective. In this chapter the similarities will be described, demonstrating how this text supports the ideas of Christian humanism. Finally, a number of Children's Bibles which

¹⁹⁴ 1995b. *The NIV study Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

¹⁹⁵ Marcus, J. 2009. *Mark 8 - 16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. p863.

present the story of the Widow's Offering will be explored to see whether their portrayals of the story correlate with the new reading and the principles of Christian humanism.

3.11 Human Value

The perception that people have inherent value is a belief which undergirds the whole idea of Christian humanism. It is clear that Jesus also holds this view through a number of scenarios, already mentioned: Jesus engages with the blind and disabled¹⁹⁶ and takes the time to heal those in Mark 5 who had been excluded from society.¹⁹⁷ The discourse of the Widow's Offering reveals the same message. The presence of a woman in the story indicates that Jesus had chosen to sit in the area further away from the central Holy of Holies than where he as a Jewish man would have had access to. This shows that Jesus is content to be around people who were considered 'beneath' him. In fact Jesus is concerned about the widow, taking notice of her, even though she would have been considered insignificant and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. He, unlike the disciples and self-absorbed religious leaders, is aware of her and her desperate position. Jesus' response to the scribes further demonstrates his belief that a person's worth is independent of their social status, as he is not convinced by the displays of honour afforded to the scribes. The commitment of Christian humanism, not to exclude people – regardless of their age, race, gender, ethnicity, religion or anything else – can also be found within the biblical narrative as Jesus rejects the way society classifies people.¹⁹⁸ de Gruchy justifies this human focus within a religious theory with the explanation that,

Salvation understood in terms of reconciliation has to do with overcoming alienation between God and ourselves in a way that is inseparable from restoring human relationships and therefore human well-being. And if to be truly human means living in a right relationship with others, understanding salvation in this way is of central importance.¹⁹⁹

3.12 Relevant

The quest for relevance is one of the Christian humanists' main priorities. In order to speak meaningfully into a situation, or to even speak about it, people need to be familiar with the context. It is only through honestly and critically evaluating what is going on, that the people

¹⁹⁶ Mark 8: 22-26 and 10: 46-52. These passages were described as being pivotal in the structure of the Gospel.

¹⁹⁷ This text was used as an illustration for the 'sandwich construction' in the previous chapter.

¹⁹⁸ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p184.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p153.

will be able to reflect, and offer helpful insights into the situation. An awareness of the most pressing issues of the Bible and modern contexts, means that energy can be directed into prioritising and addressing those concerns. Within the story of the Widow's Offering, Jesus contextualises his teaching against the scribes as he refers to a real situation, which has been affected by the Temple and leaders' greed, in order to substantiate his point. Erasmus, Thomas More, Calvin and many other Christian humanists sought to bring about positive transformation through love, justice and peace across all sectors of life.²⁰⁰ Although they were renowned theologians, their focus and desire for reform was not limited to the church or obviously related matters. Knowledge of Palestinian society and the Temple structure assures hearers and readers that Jesus' teachings and the message of the Widow's Offering are not limited to ecclesial issues.

3.13 Challenging Dehumanising Institutions and Practises

In acknowledging the woman's offering, Jesus is not only recognising the woman's selfless act, but is also drawing attention to the injustices present in the poor widow's life. Jesus offers a warning against the self-interested leadership who are taking advantage of the vulnerable. He challenges the authorities and institutions which create and impose laws and practises that enforce the woman's poverty, stripping her of her livelihood and dignity. Furthermore, the prediction of the Temple's collapse alludes to the tangible consequences for those who do not take heed of the warning and continue to exploit and oppress others. This meaning is in agreement with the principles of Christian humanism as it advocates a more transformative message which, 'challenge[s] all forces and processes that are dehumanizing and depersonalising, and especially those that are blatantly crimes against humanity.'²⁰¹ Christians and the Church need to actively seek ways for the Bible's message of love and justice to be materialised for all humanity. For Christian humanism understands Christianity to be concerned with people's present experience of reality, and not just issues of salvation and eschatology.

²⁰⁰ ---. 2010. *John Calvin, Karl Barth and Christian humanism. Teologie 150 + Calvin 500*, Is Vol Deel 51 Supplementum, 370-378. p372.

²⁰¹ ---. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p167.

Jesus' attack on the Temple was an important sign, for in first century Palestine, the Temple was the symbolic centre of the land and universe.²⁰² It was responsible for organising people into the different strata of society, enforcing this through segregation of the people according to their different characteristics and backgrounds. The concentric circles which widened around the Temple's centre, or Holy of Holies, inadvertently ranked the different groups. The closer each person was allowed to the centre of the Temple, the more highly they were regarded by society. Through his actions and teachings, Jesus is seen rejecting and challenging this fundamental religious, political and economic structure which exploited people, and undermined their identity. de Gruchy captures this as he writes,

Jesus did not claim divine status, nor did he plan to overthrow the Roman authorities; he witnessed to the reign of God, and therefore to the demands of God's righteousness. In doing so he made it clear that God's reign was not to be confused with a form of religion and politics that dehumanised others, but with the well-being of all people, especially the common people oppressed by Roman rule and by corrupt religious leaders.²⁰³

Modelled on Jesus, Christian humanism opposes any institution or power which is responsible for dehumanising people in anyway, with religion and religious institutions and organisations being no exception.²⁰⁴

3.14 Enquiring Nature and Honesty

In order to discover the additional teaching embedded within the broader text, the reader has to be willing to approach the text through fresh eyes, which are free of the traditional interpretations of this particular passage and the biblical message. Christian humanism encourages this questioning nature, engaging with difficult questions and allowing for honest human responses. The complexities of texts, their inconclusive nature and the accompanying uncertainties are acknowledged and dealt with by Christian humanists even if left unresolved. This method allows for difficult questions to be asked, without the expectation that the traditional answers will be supplied. These pre-determined answers often have no foundation and force the interpretation or understanding along a certain theological direction, without allowing the flexibility for new, potentially more coherent interpretations of the text to be taken from the text.

²⁰² Metzger, B.M. 1965. *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*. Nashville: Abingdon. p53.

²⁰³ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p145.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. p163.

The expanded interpretation of the Widow's Offering represents the ideals of Christian humanism. The woman is selfless, thinking beyond herself in the way that Christian humanism expects. The value of each person is demonstrated. Issues of social justice are raised and addressed from within their contexts in a way that is honest and challenging. The depth and relevance of this message is not reflected within Children's Bibles renditions of this narrative, as they simply present the story as a moral message of generous giving.

3.15 The Story of the Widow's Offering Depicted in Children's Bibles

The story of the Widow's Offering does not feature regularly across all Children's Bibles, but where translations do appear, there is a consistent message which emerges out of the simplified story. The sincere generosity of the poor widow and her dependency on God is focused on as she offers her small yet significant gift. This will be shown as the portrayal of the Widow's Offering in four Children's Bibles will be explored. A fifth Children's Bible will be analysed as it makes reference to the last two verses in the pericope of Mark 12: 38 – 13: 2.

The *International Children's Story Bible*²⁰⁵ heads the story of Mark 12: 41-44 as 'A Poor Woman's Great Gift'. The details of the story include a description of the Temple treasury as a 'box where people put their money gifts to God'. The small offering by the woman is emphasised, before Jesus delivers his teaching which follows quite closely to the adult version, describing how the rich have given out of their wealth, while the poor woman gave all that she had. There is a final phrase, 'God loves true givers' which concludes the short narrative by reiterating the message.

Mark 12 is entitled 'The Biggest Gift of All' in *The Children's Bible in 365 Stories*²⁰⁶. Although there is no specific chapter reference, the focus of story followed is that of the Widow's Offering. The concept of 12: 38-40 – which is Jesus' judgement on the flashy scribes – is incorporated into the narrative, but is associated with the rich givers, 'Jesus watched the wealthy people throwing in large sums of money. Some slipped their gold coins in without fuss; others counted them out noisily, so that everyone would see how many gleaming coins

²⁰⁵ All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Hollingsworth, M (ed). 1990. *International Children's Story Bible: Illustrated by Children around the World*. London: Word Kids Publishing. p66-67.

²⁰⁶ All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Batchelor, M. 1985. *The Children's Bible in 365 Stories*. South Africa: Struik Christian Books. p332-33.

they were giving to God'. Then to emphasise the contrast between the widow and the rich people, the widow is described in great detail, 'Then a shabbily dressed woman came along. She was a widow, with no one to earn money for her.' This latter phrase is helpful as it helps to understand why the woman is in the situation that she is. Another piece of additional information, inserted into the story is, 'The money that was collected paid for the temple expenses.' Although this is included with the intention that it will build a fuller picture, previous investigation has suggested that it was not only used for the building's running costs, but rather supported the religious leaders' luxurious lifestyle. Like the previous Children's Bible, *The Children's Bible in 365 Stories*' final lines, strategically sum up and stresses the meaning as it concludes with, 'They still had plenty left for themselves. That widow gave all she had. She kept nothing back for herself. *That's what God calls the biggest gift of all.*'²⁰⁷ Again, the message presented is one promoting generous givers.

A similar meaning is rendered by *The Classic Children's Bible Storybook*²⁰⁸ as it demarcates Mark 12: 40-41. Jesus' teaching which declares that the woman has made the greatest contribution is highlighted as Mark 12:43 is written out between the heading and the body of the text. There is nothing particularly noteworthy as the plot is played out, and the comparisons are made. Again the closing sentence is used to state the narrative's message, but this time the author, Taylor, incorporates a different message of trust and surrender as she writes, '... while the poor widow gave everything that she had to live on. This showed how much she loved God and trusted Him.' But this idea is slightly contradictory in light of the meaning derived from the larger portion of text, as it could be seen as the exploitation and injustice of the woman being romanticised and glorified rather than something to fight against.

The final Children's Bible's rendition of the Widow's offering which will be examined is from *My Princess Bible*²⁰⁹. This Bible is quite unique in a number of ways, as it only includes stories of biblical women which are written in rhyming poetry and each narrative ends with an

²⁰⁷ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

²⁰⁸ All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Taylor (ed), L. 2011. *The Classic Children's Bible Storybook*. South Africa: Christian Art Kids. p302-03.

²⁰⁹ All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Holmes, A. 2010. *My Princess Bible: English for South Africa*. South Africa: Christian Art Kids. p43-44.

appropriation of the story to the child readers' lives as space in the sentence is left for the child's name. The story of 'The Poor Woman' from Mark 12: 41-44 is told as follows:

At the Temple some people had much to give,
But one woman had hardly enough to live.

The rich people gave lots of money away.
The poor woman gave all she had that day.

Jesus could see their coins, dull and shiny.
And he could see what they gave, large and tiny.
The poor woman's gift seemed very small,
But Jesus said it was the biggest gift of all.

The poor woman was God's princess. She went to God's house and put her coins in the offering box. Some people were rich, but the woman was not. Jesus said she gave a lot.

A princess gives God all she can.

_____ * is God's special princess.

_____ * gives God all she can.

**insert your child's name in the blank²¹⁰*

It can be seen from the highlighted line that the message is one of giving. This narrative is entertaining and likely to catch the attention of the readers, but it offers real insight into the story contained in Mark 12: 41-44. The contrast between the rich and poor is given, and Jesus is shown recognising that the widow proportionately gave the most, but the context and the engagement with the disciples is left out. The mention of 'princess' holds significant theological implications, although exactly what these are, are never explained in the book. The reference to the widow as being 'God's princess' can allude to the Christian humanist idea that everyone has inherent value, regardless of their position in life.

Purnell's Illustrated Family Bible²¹¹ divides the Children's Bible into sections, collecting together the appropriate biblical stories. Under the section, 'The Glory! – Death and

²¹⁰ Ibid. p43-45. Emphasis and bolding included in original.

²¹¹ Wangerin, W. Jr. . 1981. *Purnell's Illustrated Family Bible*. United States of America: Purnell Publishers Limited. p325.

Resurrection²¹² there is a sub-heading, 'Signs of the End of the World'²¹³ which combines Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 into a single, neat narrative. Jesus and his disciples are shown leaving the Temple. And as in Mark 13:1-2, they are seen admiring the Temple buildings, before Jesus warns them of the impending disaster. The signs indicating the fulfilment of this prophecy are then described. The context of this discussion is a little misleading as there is little distinction made between the stories – they simply run on to each other. The preceding story is 'Tuesday: Jesus Teaches: The Coming of the Kingdom' which gives little indication that Jesus' warning is issued in response to the Temple leaders' who are taking advantage of the vulnerable.

From these examples it can be seen that the Children's Bibles subscribe to the traditional understanding of the Widow's Offering. There is little room for engagement with the text as any allusions or complexities are removed, ensuring that it is presented on a one-dimensional plain. There is also only a single voice and message to be heard within each text, which is stated within the concluding lines of the narrative. This is contrary to the original Scripture passage which conveys a number of meanings speaking on various levels within the text. Children's Bibles are limited in their message and approach in comparison to that which is encouraged by Christian humanism. Their obvious moral messages do not allow space for the investigative approach of the Christian humanists, as they seek to address greater social issues and injustices. Throughout this chapter, by using the Widow's Offering as an example, it becomes evident that a critical and thorough exegesis dramatically extends the readings currently present in Children's Bibles. The following chapter begins to explore how one could offer a faithful translation of this message in a way that is accessible, yet challenging for children.

²¹² Ibid. p321.

²¹³ Ibid. p325.

Chapter 4

Children's Developments Appropriated to Contextual Bible Study

The objective of this chapter is to discuss what is needed in Children's Bibles to enable and encourage critical and theological thinking. The chapter begins by looking at the children's development in areas which relate to this study. The medium of story is critiqued. And then the current states of Children's Bibles are contrasted with the research conducted in the fields of child literacy and development. In response to this, various perceptions and techniques can be inferred and incorporated into producing more engaging and applicable Children's Bibles. These findings are then coupled with the insights of the Contextual Bible Study method, in order to adapt and create a Contextual Bible Study which reflects the expanded view of Mark 12, encompassing the principles of Christian humanism, in a way that is accessible to children. The Bible Study is a necessary tool, which enables children's insights and engagements with the text to be observed.

4.1 Child Development

It is vital to understand children, and how they develop, before an approach to teaching them the Bible can be established. Relatively little attention has been paid to children throughout history. Before the Middle Ages, those who were younger than the age of six or seven were not considered people, but were included within the infant group.²¹⁴ Once children moved out of infancy, in the other extreme, they were regarded and treated as adults during interactions. Traces of this trajectory of thinking can still be seen within modern society as in many cases children are considered insignificant and incapable of acquiring any knowledge and understanding for themselves.²¹⁵ Yet there has been an emergence of this previously neglected field of research which has increasingly revealed the importance of these developmental years. It is now understood that different age groups differ in the way they attain their knowledge; children are more reliant on their immediate surroundings to inform their understanding.²¹⁶ This dependence on the immediate

²¹⁴ Trawick-Smith, J. 2003. *Early Childhood Development: A Multicultural Perspective: Third Edition*. Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall. p17.

²¹⁵ Gillen, J. & N. Hall. 2003. *The Emergence of Early Childhood Literacy*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. p4.

²¹⁶ Kress, G. *Ibid. Perspectives on Making Meaning: The Differential Principles and Meanings of Adults and Children*. p160.

environment may appear restrictive, but research is progressively revealing just how great the extent to which children are conscious of their surroundings, and just how much they are therefore able to absorb and take note of. Robinson and Mackey write that even ‘the youngest children ... are aware of the complexities that surround them’²¹⁷, further noting that children between the ages of five and seven, are able to successfully combine congruent stories. They describe how children are not only able to infer teachings from stories, but how they are also capable of transferring this knowledge between different scenarios, stories, and situations. It is also between the ages of two and five that children begin to systematically approach problem solving.²¹⁸ The realisation that children’s comprehensive abilities are already advanced from an incredibly young age, has shifted the approach of teaching and interacting with children. People are encouraged to begin introducing children to various forms of learning as early as possible.²¹⁹

The pace of children’s language and reading development is phenomenal. On average, their ‘usable vocabulary’²²⁰ expands from two hundred words as a two year old to ten thousand words as a six year old. What is more impressive is that the study which published these results stated that this data does not include words which children understood but did not use. Although the individual’s vocabulary continues to advance throughout their childhood, there is a shift in the way this progress manifests. In the later years of childhood, the primary development is found in the words that the children are already familiar with, as they grasp a deeper understanding of them, rather than acquiring new words into their vocabulary.²²¹ Research has also suggested that by five years of age, children already have a command over most language rules, ‘They can speak in long declaratives, or questions that contain negatives and clauses.’²²² There are a few sentence structures, such as the passive voice, which children struggle to comprehend the meaning of with certainty until the age of eight. The passive must therefore be used with caution, so that syntax is not responsible for hindering the child’s grasp of the narrative. It is also from this age, that children begin to

²¹⁷ Robinson, M. & M. Mackey. *Ibid. Film and Television*. SAGE Publishers. p134.

²¹⁸ Trawick-Smith, J. 2003. *Early Childhood Development: A Multicultural Perspective: Third Edition*. Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall, *ibid.* p224.

²¹⁹ Gillen, J. & N. Hall. 2003. *The Emergence of Early Childhood Literacy*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. p4.

²²⁰ Trawick-Smith, J. 2003. *Early Childhood Development: A Multicultural Perspective: Third Edition*. Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall. p265.

²²¹ *Ibid.* p385.

²²² *Ibid.* p389.

comprehend the concepts of the past and present and have an awareness of space. Once these are established, the fields of 'history, geography, and economics'²²³ can be explored, which is important for this study as the Temple's function needs to be conveyed and discussed.

4.2 Story

The value and importance of story is articulated a number of times throughout de Gruchy's work. The various genres of story are described, and the multiple mediums and modes of conveying them are alluded to: the spoken narrative, illustrations, and dramatisations to name a few. It is only in relatively modern times that there has been a movement away from the oral tradition as the majority of modern story-telling is now written or recorded rather than shared through narrations between individuals. But regardless of their form or delivery, stories have always been a part of human life as it has been used to safe-guard and transfer history, convey knowledge and understanding, offer insights, and instil purpose.²²⁴ de Gruchy describes story-telling as 'a reflection on or interpretation of life in its varied dimensions.'²²⁵

Stories allow onlookers or listeners into constructed scenarios or worlds, as they invite people to share in the situations, experiences, emotions and philosophies described.²²⁶ This can contribute to the development of the identity of individuals or societies, as well as provide outsiders with the opportunities to engage with the perceptions, beliefs and history of others, as the different elements of the narrative are explored. Expressed through the various mediums of art, drama, the written word, dreams and every day conversation, stories have intercepted all arenas of life. Naturally, children become familiar with stories, and begin to tell and communicate through them 'from the onset of connected language.'²²⁷ Children are further accustomed to stories as families and teachers use them as a means of

²²³ Ibid. p357.

²²⁴ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p4-11.

²²⁵ Ibid. p7.

²²⁶ Worsley, H. August 2004. *How Children Aged 9-10 Understand Bible stories: A Study of Children at a Church-Aided and a State Primary School in the Midlands*. *International Journal for Children's Spirituality*, Is 2, Vol 9, 203-217. p217.

²²⁷ Fox, C. 2003. *Playing the Storyteller: Some Principles for Learning Literacy in the Early Years of Schooling*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. p189.

educating and entertainment. Therefore, there is great potential for the Bible, which is described as the 'grand narrative'²²⁸ to be accessed by children.

In the same way that there are many different story-telling mediums, there are various different genres. Stories range from being factual recounts of events or descriptions, to elaborate narratives, fantasy, fables, rhymes or are embedded in poetry. They can be entertaining, emotive, or educational. Regardless of the story's characteristics and constructions, it can never be 'culturally or ideologically neutral'²²⁹. Although stories can be an effective teaching tool, capturing people's attention, enlightening them, and shaping their values among other things, it cannot be assumed that every story communicates a positive message. Yet, the response and interpretation of every particular story will be decided by the context and perspectives of each individual and community.²³⁰ Therefore a variety of reactions can be expected as people discern whether to dismiss the story entirely, or to what extent they decide to engage with it, allowing it to inform their beliefs, behaviours and plans which can be adapted accordingly.

It becomes evident that story is a pivotal element to each person's own life as our minds structure and process all of our experiences in a narrative form. Fox writes of this: 'the literature from domains of study as diverse as psychoanalysis, anthropology, linguists, literary theory and cognitive psychology has tended to confirm the view that human minds order experience in the mode of story.'²³¹ As our past is represented by multiple narratives captured as memories, life can be viewed as a compilation of stories which develops through the influence and interaction with other stories, over time. It is because of the intrinsic nature of stories, which overlaps, sharing different elements with other stories that people are able to relate to stories which are not their own.

²²⁸ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p8.

²²⁹ Cairney, T. 2003. *Literacy within Family Life*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p94.

²³⁰ Maillard, E. 2003. *Gender and Early Childhood Literacy*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. p88.

²³¹ Fox, C. 2003. *Playing the Storyteller: Some Principles for Learning Literacy in the Early Years of Schooling*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. p189.

4.3 The Complexity of Children's Bibles

The emergence of Children's Bibles is not a recent development, with the first 'post-Reformation German children's Bible' being produced in 1529CE.²³² Children's Bibles have subsequently become more readily available in a variety of versions. It is also a common, long-standing practise amongst Christian communities to teach the Bible to children. But only in recent years has there been a shift in the objective and approach. Often the Bible was taught to children simply because it was something that they needed to know. With this perception children are introduced to the Scripture's stories, passages and verses, but they are not expected to critically engage with them in any way. All that was required in the interaction between the children and the Bible was for the passages to be heard, and at most remembered and recited. Sometimes, accompanying the reading, a simple message elicited from the text is stated by the teacher – but even with this, the emphasis seldom delves beyond the surface level of the text. An alternate motivation for teaching the Bible to children can be seen as people use the biblical stories as a useful tool to teach moral lessons, which are then naturally enforced by the authority and respect associated with the Bible.

Authors and translators of any version of the Bible need to be as faithful as possible in capturing and conveying the message intended by the original writer. Although it is impossible to relay the Bible's meaning with complete confidence, those who interpret the Bible in order to enable others to have access to it must be wary of imposing additional features to the text, or portraying it in a specific manner in order to convey a particular meaning.²³³ This manipulation of the Scriptures to teach morals or to support a principle or belief which is not directly contained within the Bible is not a new practise.²³⁴ In her article, *Teaching the Bible to Children*, Eastman challenges these approaches which teach 'knowledge of biblical content for its own sake or for its value in eliciting moral behaviour'²³⁵ without presenting much theological reflection or even suggesting that there may be various dimensions to the text and interpretation. She believes that if the teacher's objective is that the child will ultimately discover a depth to the Bible and be able to interpret it in such a way

²³² Bottigheimer, R.B. 1993 May. *Bible Reading, "Bibles" and the Bible for Children in Early Modern Germany*. Oxford University Press on behalf of Past and Present Society, Is Vol 139, 66-89. P68.

²³³ Hollander, H.W. 1986 October. *A Children's Bible or the Bible for Children*. *The Bible Translator*, Is 4, Vol 37. p424.

²³⁴ Bottigheimer, R.B. 1993 May. *Bible Reading, "Bibles" and the Bible for Children in Early Modern Germany*. Oxford University Press on behalf of Past and Present Society, Is Vol 139, 66-89. P139.

²³⁵ Eastman, F. 1971. *Teaching the Bible to Children*. In *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary of the Bible*. 1988., ed. C. M. Laymon. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1259-1263. p1259.

that it applies to their context, then this dynamic must be introduced in Children's Bibles. In order to ensure this natural progression through the age-specific Bibles, the content has to consistently portray the same theological message, which is just expanded as more detail is offered at each level.²³⁶

Children's Bibles typically present stories in a neat and uncomplicated manner, removing any ambiguities and difficult or unpleasant subject matter.²³⁷ But the benefits of this approach have come into question, as research is increasingly suggesting that the spiritual intelligence of children has been under-estimated. Through a study which observed how children interacted with their parents and the Bible, Worsley noted that the children used in the sample were better able to adapt their theological perspectives after being introduced to new ideas than the adults – even those who felt that they adhered to a liberal theological approach.²³⁸ There is also a sense that by exposing children to 'unresolved stories of darkness'²³⁹ they are also being exposed to a 'deeper reality.'²⁴⁰ Within the study, Worsley describes how unexpectedly well children have coped in instances where they have had the opportunity to deal with more complex biblical texts. A long term benefit of this is that children will become accustomed to the idea that the text or its interpretation are sometimes inconclusive, and they will be better equipped to deal with it.

Children's deep desire to make sense of their world is displayed through their inquisitive nature. For younger children, the majority of this learning takes place through 'playful'²⁴¹ activities. It is only in a later stage of the child's life that the more traditional and conventional methods of teaching provide the maximum opportunity for learning. Stories are considered a 'playful' medium of learning, as it can actively engage the child's imagination in a fun manner, making it an enjoyable and fulfilling activity. The narrative

²³⁶ This uniformity between the biblical messages is also important as the Children's Bible Stories are often the only form of Scripture which some people, whether Christian or not, are ever exposed to. Therefore, as in the case of my immediate cousins, the simple and delightfully illustrated stories can become the sole foundation for perceptions of faith and theology.

²³⁷ Naudé, J.A. 2005. *Twentieth-Century English Bible Translations. Acta Theologica*, 1s Vol 2, 70-89.

²³⁸ Worsley, H. August 2004. *How Children Aged 9-10 Understand Bible stories: A Study of Children at a Church-Aided and a State Primary School in the Midlands. International Journal for Children's Spirituality*, 1s 2, Vol 9, 203-217.

²³⁹ Ibid. p123.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Fox, C. 2003. *Playing the Storyteller: Some Principles for Learning Literacy in the Early Years of Schooling*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications.

nature of the Bible means that a natural way to introduce children to the Scriptures would be through the use of story. And research suggests that children over the age of five should be able to distinguish their present context and the world of the Bible, as studies have shown that children are able to disengage themselves from reality and move into imagined, fantasy worlds²⁴² and deal with 'symbolic thought.'²⁴³ Children already have a wealth of experiences which they can use to complete stories, adding substance to the areas which have not been explicitly described; children, like adults can 'fill in the many gaps that stories naturally offer.'²⁴⁴ Another interesting dynamic between children and the stories that they encounter, is that their experiences not only add insights to the story, but that children are able to apply some of the insights gained from the story to their own lives in order to better understand it.²⁴⁵

4.4 Selection of Texts

The process of selecting which narratives and passages should be incorporated into a Children's Bible needs to be carefully considered, in order that when they are viewed individually and collectively, they portray the right message. Hollander states that the ideal would be to include all of the biblical stories, allowing children to choose which stories they would like to read, but he accepts that this would not be practical.²⁴⁶ The suggestion is made to include a variety of passages which represent the different genres within the text. Wachlin lists the biblical narratives which are fundamental to understanding the Bible as; 'Creation and Fall, Cain and Abel, Noah, Joseph, Moses, Samson, David and Goliath, Solomon, Jonah, the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son.'²⁴⁷ These may be characteristic texts as throughout history numerous artistic and literary allusions being drawn from them, but they offer a very limited view of the Bible and biblical characters. An immediate illustration of the restricted scope that this selection offers is seen as parables are the sole representation of the New Testament texts.

²⁴² Ibid. p90. Trawick-Smith, J. 2003. *Early Childhood Development: A Multicultural Perspective: Third Edition*. Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall. p224.

²⁴³ ---. 2003. *Early Childhood Development: A Multicultural Perspective: Third Edition*. Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall. p229.

²⁴⁴ Martinez, M., N. Roser & C. Dooley. 2003. *Young Children's Literary Meaning Making*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p222.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p225.

²⁴⁶ Hollander, H.W. 1986 October. *A Children's Bible or the Bible for Children*. *The Bible Translator*, Is 4, Vol 37. p423.

²⁴⁷ Wachlin, M. G. 1998 March. *The Bible: Why We Need To Teach It; How Some Do*. *The English Journal*, Is 3, Vol 87, 31-36. p34.

There is growing support for the suggestion to incorporate stories from the Bible which have previously been rejected as inappropriate material for younger readers. By including stories around potentially sensitive issues, a platform is created to engage with children about those issues. As mentioned previously, James argues strongly to give children the opportunity to engage with the story of Tamar's rape, as she believes that it can be a resource to make children aware of potential dangers as well as to provide children who have been in similar situations with coping tools.²⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that century ago, the Children's Bibles did not edit out the stories of things such as violence, sexuality or general unhappiness, to the extent that modern versions do. During the Middle Ages, Noah was described as naked, Potiphar's attempt to seduce Joseph was recorded and even tales of murders were considered acceptable subject matter for children.²⁴⁹

4.5 Illustrations

Pictures are an effective and accessible way of contributing to the meaning of a text. The child's attention is captured by the illustration and meaning is conveyed through them. Children often understand the message inferred by a picture more easily than that of the text.²⁵⁰ Imagery can add substance to a story as it can convey information which has deliberately been left of the text in an attempt to simplify it. Although, in as much as the illustrations can be helpful, if they do not align with the text's message, then they can detract from the intended interpretation.²⁵¹ Walker gives a powerful example of how pictures can be misleading, as she writes in her novel, *The Color Purple*, ‘

... Over the pulpit there is a saying: *Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands to God*. Think what it means that Ethiopia is Africa! All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. But really *white* white people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why they says that Jesus

²⁴⁸ James, G.L. 2007. *Tell It Like It Is! The Case to Include the Story of the Rape of Tamar in Children's Bibles as an Awareness Tool*. *Journal for Semitics*, Is 2, Vol 16, 312-332.

²⁴⁹ Bottigheimer, R.B. 1993 May. *Bible Reading, "Bibles" and the Bible for Children in Early Modern Germany*. *Oxford University Press on behalf of Past and Present Society*, Is Vol 139, 66-89. p74.

²⁵⁰ Nikolajeva, M. 2003. *Verbal and Visual Literacy: The Role of Picturebooks in the Reading Experience of Young Children*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p235-39.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't even curly²⁵²

In many cases artists have presented tradition rather than theology, as Jesus is presented as a 'whitey in a nightie'²⁵³, rather than depicting someone who is likely to be a more accurate representation of Jesus. Another example of this is with the heavenly beings, who are often drawn as blonde, glowing and flawless, Western men.²⁵⁴ These images have had negative repercussions on the way in which many ethnic groups engage with each other and the Bible, as they have re-enforced negative race stereotypes.²⁵⁵ Although it is important to note the importance of the use imagery, and to be aware of how it can contribute to the understanding or the misinterpretation of the text, limited space does not allow a full engagement with this issue, and just the text will be focused on.

4.6 Gender Awareness

Within the South African context, education and literacy are now available to both boys and girls alike, yet there is still a noticeable difference between the manner in which each gender generally interacts with stories.²⁵⁶ By observing, among other things, which details children include in the retelling of stories, the plot and types of stories re-enacted during play time, and the subjects of art work, the separate areas of interest, stereotypically attached to young boys and girls, can be deduced. Boys demonstrate that they are interested in stories of strong, individual characters, lots of facts and an action packed plot, while girls are more enchanted with more placid stories, depicting families, and where the plot progresses through the development of relationships, rather than events. There is no consensus as to why there are these distinctions in children's interests, some research has shown that it is picked up and modelled on gender-stereotyping present in homes and media, while other scholars have found that even in gender-neutral environments children gravitate towards these different gendered areas. Regardless of the reasoning, in order to maintain the child's

²⁵² Walker, A. 1982. *The Color Purple*. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ) Publishers. p113.

²⁵³ This is a saying often used amongst my family in jest, when pictures portray Jesus or other Biblical characters as Caucasian people dressed in long, flowing white robes. Raphael and Titian's impressions of Judgement day are two examples of this.

²⁵⁴ Examples of this can be found in 2000b. *The Most Important Story Ever Told*. Vereeniging RSA: Christelike Uitgewersmaatskappy. And Du Toit, J.S. & L. Beard. 2007. *The Publication of Children's Bibles in Indigenous South African Languages: An Investigation into the Current State of Affairs*. *Journal for Semitics*, Is 2, Vol 16, 297-311. p297-311.

²⁵⁵ 2000a. *Elona Bali Likhulu Lamaxesha Onke*. Vereeniging RSA: Christelike Uitgewersmaatskappy. p24-27.

²⁵⁶ Maillard, E. 2003. *Gender and Early Childhood Literacy*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. p22-27.

attention, it is important to incorporate a balance of these areas of interest, notwithstanding some of the gender-essentialist ideas that may be present in much of the research conducted.

4.7 Local Context

The movement to translate the Bible into vernacular languages is vehemently being advocated because of the belief that people are able to engage with the Scriptures – or any other text – best in their own language.²⁵⁷ This urgency has not been transferred into translating Children’s Bibles in South Africa, with very few available in anything other than Afrikaans and English.²⁵⁸ Largely due to financial constraints, South Africa is predominantly dependent on overseas imports. There have been attempts to replace the English text in Children’s Bibles with traditional African languages; examples of this are *The Most Important Story Ever Told*²⁵⁹ which forms the base of *Elona Bali Likhulu Lamaxesha Onke*²⁶⁰ and *The Illustrated Bible Story: New Testament*²⁶¹ becomes *Umlando Webhayibheli Ochazwa Ngezithombe: IThestamente Elisha*²⁶². Despite the language being adapted to fit the African context, the pictures have not been modified to suite the new local language, creating inconsistencies as the illustrations clearly represent foreign, predominantly Western, contexts. One page, demonstrating this, has the transcribed Zulu text, yet portrays the stereotype of an America street with Broadway lights framing signs for Night Clubs, Casinos and the like.²⁶³ The illustrations are not congruent with Palestine in the time of Jesus, nor the modern context. It is important that the words, symbols and pictures hold the correct connotations in the context that they are being used.

The relationship between children and a text is evidently a complex one. Every different facet of a Children’s Bible makes an important contribution to the text, and needs to be evaluated carefully in order to ensure that the Bible is faithfully represented. Children’s ability to engage with language, literature and their world cannot be under-estimated. Even

²⁵⁷ Naudé, J.A. 2005. *Twentieth-Century English Bible Translations*. *Acta Theologica*, Is Vol 2, 70-89. p74.

²⁵⁸ Du Toit, J.S. & L. Beard. 2007. *The Publication of Children's Bibles in Indigenous South African Languages: An Investigation into the Current State of Affairs*. *Journal for Semitics*, Is 2, Vol 16, 297-311. p300-03.

²⁵⁹ 2000b. *The Most Important Story Ever Told*. Vereeniging RSA: Christelike Uitgewersmaatskappy.

²⁶⁰ 2000a. *Elona Bali Likhulu Lamaxesha Onke*. Vereeniging RSA: Christelike Uitgewersmaatskappy.

²⁶¹ Pearl, M. 2008. *The Illustrated Bible Story: New Testament*. Tennessee: No Greater Joy Ministries, Inc.

²⁶² ---. 2011. *Umlando Webhayibheli Ochazwa Ngesithombe: IThestamente Elisha*. Vereeniging RSA: Christelike Uitgewersmaatskappy.

²⁶³ *Ibid.* p65.

though the Bible may not have been intended for a young audience, there is immense value in introducing people to the Bible from childhood.²⁶⁴ Equipping children with tools to critically and theologically engage with the Bible, and the issues which it raises, provide a foundation for rich readings of the text in later years. There is a growing awareness that children do not attend church to simply be ‘entertained’²⁶⁵, but with the hopes that they will be engaged with and challenged. It is when these expectations are not met that children later abandon the church, despondent.²⁶⁶

Therefore, it is necessary to develop a Bible which provides children with the opportunity to delve deeper into the Scriptures than is possible in the majority of Children’s Bibles currently available. The next important step is not only to uncover the message contained within the passages, but to then translate this into the reader’s life.²⁶⁷ For there is a conversation which takes place between the ancient world of the text and the modern world, which allows the Bible itself to speak into people’s life experiences. The Contextual Bibles Study has shown itself to be an effective model and method to further establish this dialogue.

4.8 Contextual Bible Study

The Contextual Bible Study was developed as a means of discerning what ‘the Bible is saying to our South African context today’²⁶⁸ and as the name suggests, this approach commits to studying the *Bible* from within the reader’s *context*. The resources, experiences and insights of ‘trained readers’ and ‘ordinary readers’²⁶⁹ alike, are valued, as the selected text is read from three different perspectives. Through this thorough process, space is created for the meaning of the text to be revealed and then translated into a way that can be applied to modern society and life. The Contextual Bible Study is a useful resource for a number of reasons. It makes the Bible accessible as it provides people with the tools to critically engage

²⁶⁴ Hollander, H.W. 1986 October. *A Children's Bible or the Bible for Children. The Bible Translator*, Is 4, Vol 37. 423.

²⁶⁵ Oxbrow, <. & G. James. 2010. *Forms of Missionary Engagement*. In *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*, eds. B. D. & K. Kim. Oxford: Regnum Books International. p127.

²⁶⁶ Ovwogho, P.C. & A. Cole. May 2010. *Scriptural Engagement, Communication with God, and Moral Behaviour among Children. International Journal for Children's Spirituality*, Is 2, Vol 15, 101-113. p111.

²⁶⁷ Eastman, F. 1971. *Teaching the Bible to Children*. In *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary of the Bible. 1988.*, ed. C. M. Laymon. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1259-1263. p1261.

²⁶⁸ West, G.O. 2007. *Contextual Bible Study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. p7.

²⁶⁹ West explains these two terms in *Contextual Bible Study*, describing the ‘trained reader’ as someone who is a minister or theologian who has taken formal courses in the fields of Theology and Biblical Studies. The ‘ordinary reader’ represents the rest of the people who read or engage with the Bible in whatever manner – even including those ‘who are illiterate but who listen to, discuss and retell the Bible’ *ibid.* p9.

with the Bible. Because of this, people can be encouraged, made aware of injustices, prompted to action, and oppressive theological traditions can be revisited and altered. Since the process itself is dynamic, it can be adapted in order to meet the needs of a vast range of readers. The comprehensive booklet, entitled *Contextual Bible Study*²⁷⁰ was compiled by Gerald West as a guide to understand why the process has been designed as it is, and how one could go about facilitating such a Bible Study.

4.9 Contextual

There are a few points which need to be considered in order to interpret the Bible through contextual lenses.²⁷¹ The reader has to be aware of who they are and of the context which they are in. They also need to be willing to engage with those from a different background as well as their interpretations of the text. It is not possible for people to divorce themselves from their past experiences and read a text completely objectively, and therefore individual readers need to acknowledge who they are, in order to recognise how these factors may influence their understanding of the Bible. It is also important to consider the wider context, being aware of the community's central concerns and principles in order to be able to identify texts which may offer insight into relevant issues. Acts 17:16-34 offers a biblical example of this as the Apostle Paul appropriates his message to the context within which he is teaching. This principle is in line with Christian humanism which fully acknowledges the reality and importance of people's experiences, as it requires all theological conversation to be in dialogue with people's contexts.

Another way in which this process echoes the principles of Christian humanism, is that the interpretation of the text is not limited to biblical scholars; everyone, whether trained or not, can contribute to constructing and discerning the meaning. People can offer the insights gained from their life experiences, which may reveal or support different elements of interpretations of the text. Those who are academically trained in theology and biblical studies are encouraged to share their knowledge, yet to do so in a manner which does not impose their pre-established reading onto the ordinary reader. The ordinary readers must have an opportunity to offer their perspectives. All contributions, made by trained and ordinary readers alike, need to be critically evaluated. Through this process, a richness

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid. p11-18.

emerges, as the different perceptions are noted and a more substantial and deeper understanding of the text is created.

People are already accustomed to the concept of applying the messages drawn out of the Bible to their own lives, as many sermons subscribe to this practise. This is echoed by the Contextual Bible Study's approach as there is an expectation that the process will result in 'individual and social transformation.'²⁷² West describes how many people have pledged to reading the Bible from the 'perspective of the poor and oppressed.'²⁷³ This commitment comes in response to the observation that the God in the Bible focuses on seeking justice for the vulnerable members of society. By reading the Bible in solidarity with the marginalised, and translating the example set into their own lives, readers will be prompted to act against injustice and oppression.

4.10 Critical Bible Reading

There is a misunderstanding that reading the Bible critically demonstrates a lack of faith and disrespect for the Holy Scriptures, but this is not an accurate perspective. A critical reading takes the Bible itself seriously, investigating what it says, rather than what tradition presents it as saying. Another misperception is that there is only one voice which can be heard throughout the Bible.²⁷⁴ The Bible was written by various people, who lived in a variety of contexts, which would have influenced them and their theology. The apparent inconsistencies within the Bible need to be acknowledged, the overlooked texts need to be investigated and the familiar passages and stories revisited. By approaching the Bible in this manner, new messages will be revealed and old ones possibly corrected. West suggests 'reading the Bible in its historical and sociological context', 'in its literary context' and 'in its thematic and symbolic context as a whole'.²⁷⁵

4.11 Behind the Text

'Behind the text'²⁷⁶ refers to the more traditional approach to biblical study as it investigates all the socio-historic elements of the text. This process considers the context and society that

²⁷² Ibid. p12.

²⁷³ Ibid. p13.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 20-22.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. 21-22.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. 29.

the text was created in and possible reasons and motivations that prompted the author to write it as they did. The sources that the text includes or was based on are also analysed as well as why it was constructed in the specific way that it was, using the historical-critical tools of source and redaction criticism. By considering the background to the text, information, which the author may have assumed would have been common knowledge to their intended audience, can fill some of the narrative gaps, offering explanations and giving meaning to parts of the text which may otherwise have been misinterpreted or mistakenly considered insignificant. It also helps to locate the text within real people, demonstrating God's presence in real-life scenarios. Enquiring into these elements may also explain why the author recorded specific events, focused on particular issues, addressed them in the way that they did or even reveal what original message had probably been intended by the author. By taking note of such information, the extent to which people can manipulate the text to convey a message devised to accommodate their own purposes is somewhat restricted.

4.12 *The Text Itself*

Different insights into the text can be gleaned by just paying attention to the final form of the Scriptures. This mode of reading, referred to as *the text itself*²⁷⁷, which looks at a self-contained portion of Scripture is the mode of reading which is most familiar to ordinary readers. Meaning is drawn from the way that the text's various elements interact with each other, such as the plot, structure, setting and characters. Meaning is also inferred by observing the use of literary devices, such as repetition, deliberate ambiguity, subtle suggestions, and quotes.²⁷⁸ In order to pick up many of these nuances, one often has to become familiar with the text, reading it a number of times. There is no restriction on the length of the portion of Scripture selected: it can be anywhere from one verse, to an entire book. Although it is suggested that the reading remain within a particular book or within the writings of a particular author, as this will distort the findings of things such as the emphasis, themes and teachings.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. p35.

²⁷⁸ van Iersel, B.M.F. 1998. *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*. England: Sheffield Academic Press. v67.

4.13 In Front of the Text

The final step is to uncover what teachings and messages can be extracted out of the Scriptures and then applied these to the readers' current context.²⁷⁹ As the findings of the first and second perspectives are considered the 'predominant symbols, metaphors and themes'²⁸⁰ will emerge out of the text. The concerns, 'questions, needs and interests'²⁸¹ of the readers then engage with the meanings presented by the text in order to work out how they can be appropriated and applied to the text. Unlike the other approaches, this part of the process does not isolate a text, but critiques it in light of the wider context of the chapter, Book or Bible. By viewing the Bible in this manner, any principles which have been identified can be evaluated, by comparing them with the over-all message and voice of the Bible, and discerning whether the messages correspond. This also helps to prevent readers from manipulating the text to reveal a message which supports their own agenda. The function of establishing the readers' context is so that the reader can be directed to passages which may offer relevant insights into their situation, not to impose their agendas onto the text. The meaning that the text held in the past is therefore taken into account, but is not considered to be the final stage of investigation. What the implications of the text are for the present age, still need to be determined. As a result, in agreement with Calvin who believed that because theology was devised and interpreted by people, no one could claim any truth or message as exhaustive or absolute, there are multiple possible meanings which can be extracted from the Bible, as the text is dynamic, changing and expanding as it read by different people in new situations.²⁸²

4.14 Contextual Bible Study of Mark 12:38-13:2

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Ujamaa centre has designed a Contextual Bible Study around the story of the Widow's Offering.²⁸³ To reiterate, the Contextual Bible Study re-reads the familiar passage which has traditionally been used to promote generous giving, in such a way that it makes a comment against dishonest systems. The traditional pericope

²⁷⁹ West, G.O. 2007. *Contextual Bible Study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. p41-47.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. 41.

²⁸¹ Ibid. 44.

²⁸² Bouwsma, W.J. 1988. *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Centurt Portrait*. New York: Oxford University Press. p16. cited in de Gruchy, J. W. 2010. *John Calvin, Karl Barth and Christian humanism. Teologie 150 + Calvyn 500, Is Vol Deel 51 Supplementum*, 370-378. p373.

²⁸³ West, G.O. Draft November 2007. *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*. Produced by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development and Research. p18-25.

of Mark 12: 41-44 is read aloud²⁸⁴, and then time is given for the participants to discuss amongst themselves what they think the text is about. This intermediate step of the members talking amongst themselves is an important step, as it builds people's confidence before they are asked to share their findings with the group.

The second question introduces the reader to the idea that the selected text falls within a greater narrative and reads as follows, 'Now read Mark 12:38-40, the text that immediately precedes Mark 12:41-44. Are there connections between 12: 41-44 and 12:38-40? If so, what are they?'²⁸⁵ The process of allowing time for discussion in smaller groups and reporting back to the whole gathering is repeated. As the connections between the two sections are made – such as the power dynamics and the mention of the scribes and widows – questions begin to be raised as to whether the meaning which was originally assumed is in fact the message contained in the text. The third question is structured in much the same way, as it simply includes the Mark 13:1-2 into the reading of the text and the process of reading and reporting back is repeated.

The Contextual Bible Study then looks to a bigger portion of the Gospel, as it asks the members to read the whole section based in the Temple setting. The fourth question is quite a lengthy one, referring to a number of different aspects of the text. It says,

Jesus comes into the temple at 11:27 and leaves the temple at 13:3. In this literary unit who are the main characters or groups of characters, what do we know about them, and what are the relationships between them? Draw a picture of the relationships between the characters in the temple. What does your picture say about the literary unit as a whole?²⁸⁶

This is obviously quite a complex question, and therefore quite demanding. It is suggested that each group have between 30-45 minutes in order to discuss the question properly and draw a picture. The groups often ask the facilitator to supplement their understanding of some of the socio-historic elements mentioned in the Scriptures.

²⁸⁴ West reiterates that the text is deliberately read aloud in order to ensure that every member of the group has access to the story, regardless of how literate they are or not.

²⁸⁵ West, G.O. Draft November 2007. *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*. Produced by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development and Research. p19.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. p20.

The author of the Gospel is often seen using the change in setting as an indicator to a change in theme. From this, sections of Scripture which are demarcated in one location, can be viewed as a unified text. The Temple setting is first introduced in Mark 11: 11, Jesus is seen moving between Jerusalem – where the Temple is located – and the outlying towns a number of times. But from Mark 11:27 Jesus enters the Temple, and successive stories are relayed until Jesus leaves in Mark 13:3. Judgment is pronounced on the scribes, the rich, and Temple in this pericope. The central thrust and underlying message of Jesus' threat is because these leaders are responsible for the widow's poverty. As the reader realises this, the widow's action is no longer the centre of the text, but the structural injustices implemented by the Temple system.

Certain themes emerge as Mark 11:27 – 13:2 is read; Jesus and the crowds are seen as supportive of each other and the conflict between Jesus and the authorities is present. It is not just between Jesus and the scribes that tension is demonstrated. The Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees are also presented in a similar light as they confront Jesus, trying to trap him in their questioning. Just through these literary aspects of a text, the additional message has already begun to emerge.

The next question moves outside of the literary aspects, into the socio-historical elements of the Gospel passage as the question, 'How did the temple function in first century Palestine, in the time of Jesus?'²⁸⁷ is asked. A description of the Temple's control of the religious, economic, political, and social life emerges. Readers' thoughts are compounded as they realise the extent of the control and the repercussions of this.

The final questions contextualise the whole discussion asking, 'How does this text speak to our respective contexts?' and then, 'What actions will you plan in response to this Bible Study?'²⁸⁸ Through this Contextual Bible Study, the members of the group learn more about the specific story and background of the Widow's Offering, how the Bible can be approached in order to draw a more substantial picture, as well as how this can then be applied to the readers' current experiences and situations.

²⁸⁷ Ibid. p23.

²⁸⁸ Ibid. p24.

4.15 Contextual Bible Studies for Children

There is potential for the Contextual Bible Study to also be an effective tool to use with children to enable them to engage with the Bible. There are scholars who believe that stories should be simple, not burdened by intricate detail and complications.²⁸⁹ But Comber argues against this, saying that there needs to be space for the children to engage with the different narrative elements. She believes that children are stimulated when they are met with comprehensive characters, interesting story lines and significant meaning. This can be seen as children create complex scenarios during play time, in which they use their imagination to untangle the story, making sense of the challenges.

The Contextual Bible Study can then offer a systematic approach which can be adapted to meet the needs of children. The group dynamics and the facilitation of the process by an adult or older person can also stimulate learning. There is some research which suggests that children function at their 'highest level of thinking' when they engage with other people. Subsequently, it is deduced from this that children make more sense of situations and sort through predicaments better when they are not alone.²⁹⁰ The discussion promoted during a contextual Bible study, the practise of reading the stories aloud and then repeating them a number of times during a single study, are all methods which mimic literacy methods promoted in secular research, as they provide the child with the maximum opportunity to engage with a text and topic.²⁹¹ It is also said that children develop best through activities which promote a sense of enjoyment and fulfilment.²⁹² The Contextual Bible Study has the potential to achieve this, through the relaxed manner that it engages with the children as well as creating space for them to discover meaning. Children likely to be comfortable with the process of the Contextual Bible Study, as children are familiar with stories, symbols, metaphors and the use of practices which engage their imagination in order to describe the world of the text.

²⁸⁹ Comber, B. 2003. *Critical Literacy: What Does It Look Like in the Early Years?* In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p359.

²⁹⁰ Trawick-Smith, J. 2003. *Early Childhood Development: A Multicultural Perspective: Third Edition*. Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall. p253.

²⁹¹ Martinez, M., N. Roser & C. Dooley. 2003. *Young Children's Literary Meaning Making*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p231.

²⁹² Fox, C. 2003. *Playing the Storyteller: Some Principles for Learning Literacy in the Early Years of Schooling*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. p193.

Regardless of their ages, children still have life experiences – whether they are related to things like their culture, their family dynamic or economic standing. Different cultures and contexts use various approaches when interacting with the different literary elements.²⁹³ The Contextual Bible Study allows for children to express themselves as well as the opportunity to share in the experiences of others. This concurs with Marsh’s research which concludes that anything that children are taught should consciously attempt to expand on the child’s cultural background and experiences rather than stifle or replace them.²⁹⁴

Christian humanism and Contextual Bible Study both are inclined to address issues of social injustice. This can be seen through Christian humanisms focus on the ‘self-giving’²⁹⁵ nature of Jesus, and the Contextual Bible Study’s commitment to reading the Bible from the eyes of the poor and oppressed. There is an expectation that this will be practically translated into the life of society and the individual. Within the past decade, there has been a new emphasis on the role of children as ‘agents for world transformation.’²⁹⁶ By introducing children to the principles which seek justice and peace, and encouraging them to ask pertinent questions about their context and theology, they can be more informed to incorporate these values into their lives. These may not manifest in such dramatic changes or actions within a children’s life, but they may provide the foundation for a more socially conscious and compassionate life later.

This process of Contextual Bible Study creates the space for intellectual and critical engagement which addresses de Gruchy’s concern that some people believe that ‘being ignorant fosters spiritual wisdom.’²⁹⁷ In *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*, de Gruchy acknowledges that one does not have to have formally studied the Bible to recognise profound truths within the Scriptures, but he does describe some of the benefits to having this academic foundation.²⁹⁸ But alongside the appreciation for theological education and what it has to contribute, de Gruchy also acknowledges the contribution made by the

²⁹³ Cairney, T. Ibid. *Literacy within Family Life*. SAGE Publishers. 88, 94.

²⁹⁴ Marsh, J. 2003. *Early Childhood Literacy and Popular Culture*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p112-13.

²⁹⁵ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p162.

²⁹⁶ Budijanto, B. 2010. *Theme 5: Forms of Missionary Engagement*. In *Edinburg 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*, eds. D. Balia & K. Kim. Oxford: Regnum Books International. p1.

²⁹⁷ de Gruchy, J. W. 2006. *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p178.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

‘wisdom of experience.’ This affirms Contextual Bible Study’s engagements with ‘trained’ and ‘ordinary’ readers, and their different experiences and contexts.

This chapter has looked at the various elements which enable and encourage critical and theological thinking in children. It is clear that the abilities and perceptiveness of children cannot be underestimated when selecting or developing a text which is representative of the Bible. It is important to take heed of the research which has helped us to understand how children themselves develop and how they engage with the various aspects of the Children’s Bibles in order to provide children with the best opportunity to engage with the text and its meaning. All of the different elements, such as language, illustrations, the selection of stories, and gender awareness all contribute to what the final message or emphasis is. The method of Contextual Bible Study was also explored through the chapter, as it is a useful tool to introduce children to this type of thinking. It is also useful for this particular study as it can be used as a nonthreatening way of gathering insight into the way children interact with the Bible. The following chapter will look at a Contextual Bible Study around the story of the Widow’s Offering, which was adapted and facilitated with children.

Chapter 5

Conducting a Contextual Bible Study with Children

I have argued that the interactive Contextual Bible Study method is the most appropriate way of determining whether children are able to critically and theologically engage with the principals of Christian humanism within the biblical text. In order to investigate and test the validity of the theoretical research and suggestions, the Contextual Bible Study was conducted with two groups of children. The children's answers and groups' discussion during the Contextual Bible Studies indicated that children were able to comprehend the concepts described by West as 'behind the text', 'on the text' and 'in front of the text.'²⁹⁹ After giving a description of what bases the groups were selected on and why the Contextual Bible Study was adapted as it was, a thorough report on the Contextual Bible Study is given.

The Contextual Bible Study was devised by predominantly following the structure suggested by the Ujamaa Centre for the story of the Widow's Offering, which was explored in the previous chapter. The questions were adapted slightly, taking into consideration some of the previously discussed suggestions made as to how best to engage with children.³⁰⁰ Given my previous experiences with children, I expected that they would manage to grasp the different dimensions of the text which were incorporated into the study. The answers and insights that the children gave, however, far exceeded my anticipations. There were many incidents where the children made intertextual and contextual connections – without any prompting. The children's pro-active and independent engagement with the Bible far exceeded what I had previously observed when this very study has been conducted with adults.³⁰¹

5.1 Selecting the Group Sample

Scottsville Primary School was approached and they gave their consent for a few Contextual Bible Studies to be conducted within some of their classes. This school and the particular

²⁹⁹ West, G.O. 2007. *Contextual Bible Study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. p28.

³⁰⁰ See pages 60-70

³⁰¹ I first took part in this exact Contextual Bible Study with my classmates during a Biblical Studies Course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I then facilitated a Contextual Bible Study using Ujamaa's suggested script with a group of 8 university students as part of an assignment. There have been other occasions where I have been an observer of this study, and have therefore become quite familiar with it.

group of children were selected as an appropriate case study, after a number of practical and theoretical factors had been considered; these contemplations will be explored. The school is a well-established government school in the centre of Pietermaritzburg. Two major concerns of conducting the case study were whether the school would be comfortable with, and welcoming of, the idea of a Contextual Bible Study, and whether the children had a proficient level of English language usage. Fortunately, Scottsville met both these requirements given their strong emphasis on holistic education and English proficiency. This is particularly evident in their mission statement which states: 'We aim to prepare the child holistically by providing an enlightened, balanced form of child-centred education, encompassing the academic, physical, cultural, emotional, social and spiritual spheres, based on Christian ethics and through the medium of English.'³⁰² Two classes were selected: a grade 4 class as this age group of 9/10 year olds falls close to the centre of the 'child' age bracket and a grade 1 class of 6/7 year olds. These age groups were selected with the understanding that the older grade would be more likely to be able to express themselves and what it was that they gleaned from the Contextual Bible Study, while it would be interesting to see whether the younger children could pick up on the more complicated aspects of viewing the Bible critically. The classes in each grade whose teachers read stories out of Children's Bibles were selected as the children would be less likely to be intimidated by the idea of a bible study.

It was important that the case study group were confident in English for various reasons. The primary reason for this stipulation is due to my own language limitation; in order to lead the Contextual Bible Study myself and then to be able to analyse the results it needed to be conducted in a language I was proficient in. Subsequently, the children needed to be both confident and capable in English, in order that they could understand, and partake in the discussion and reading of the text. Although a good command of the English language was a prerequisite, it is important to note that this was for practical reasons, and does not reflect a wish to make further conclusions about any particular group in society. As such, this study in no way seeks to be conclusive in establishing how critical each age, ethnic, or gender group, or the like can, or should, be in their engagement with the Bible. Another limitation made to the sampling is in selecting children who are at the right developmental stage for their age,

³⁰² School, Scottsville Primary. 2012. *Scottsville Primary School: The School That Cares*. <<http://www.scottsvilleschool.co.za/html/about.html>>. 4 November 2012. NeoPixel.

as the study does not intend to engage with issues surrounding cognitive and literacy development but rather critical and theological engagement. The teacher was therefore asked to use their knowledge of the children's capabilities to select the children for the study who were the right age and stage of development for the class. Therefore classes and groups of children were selected through 'convenience sampling.'³⁰³ Seventeen from the grade 4 class brought consent forms: 10 girls, 7 boys, of which 7 were Black, 6 White and 4 Indian.³⁰⁴ They were then divided into groups between 4 and 5. Their Bible studies would run concurrently, using the same format described in the Ujamaa Contextual Bible Study outline. The size of the Bible study groups was another important factor to consider; the group needed to be big enough for the child not to feel alone, or as if they were in an interview, and to encourage discussion while remaining small enough for each child's voice to be heard by the group and myself, as the facilitator. There were 9 children in the grade 1 class whose parents gave written consent to conduct the Contextual Bible Study, and so I decided to take them all as one group. The group demographic consisted of 5 girls, 4 boys of which, 4 were Black, 2 White and 3 Indian.

5.2 The Role of the Facilitator

There is a facilitator who guides the Contextual Bible Study through the various processes described.³⁰⁵ It is the facilitator's responsibility to manage the dynamics of the group, by giving each member of the group the opportunity to share. It is also suggested that the facilitator 'summarise' and 'clarify'³⁰⁶ the discussion in order to ensure that each person who contributes feels heard and that their point has been understood. This practise also gives everyone the opportunity to follow the dialogue as best as possible.

5.3 Conducting the Bible Study and Observations

The structure of the Contextual Bible Study is embedded within the report of the Contextual Bible Study conducted with the grade 4. Before the Contextual Bible Study commenced, I

³⁰³ Convenience sampling is a type of sampling which, 'selects participants who are available, without any prior rationale; they are non-representative, cannot be generalised about, and used in experiments where (universal) processes are supposedly examined. Blanche, M.T., K. Durrheim & D. Painter. 2007. *Research in Practice: Applied Methods for the Social Sciences: 2nd Edition*. South Africa: UCT Press. p30.

³⁰⁴ This study is not testing or comparing the different gender or race groups' abilities. The inclusion of the demographics is merely to demonstrate that the group was representative of both genders and a number of cultures.

³⁰⁵ West, G.O. 2007. *Contextual Bible Study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. p24.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

introduced myself and told the class that I was doing a thesis, which was like a project, for the University. After being granted permission by the class to use the Dictaphone, I began with a simple question to build the children's confidence and distil any anxiety about the process; so holding up a Bible, I asked, 'What is this?' The class replied with a unanimous, '*It's a Bible*'.

Photocopies of Mark 12 and 13 were handed out to each child from the 'adult' *Holy Bible: New International Version*.³⁰⁷ I had decided not to edit or simplify the text in any way, in order to maximise on the opportunity of seeing just how capable children are. The purpose of every child having their own text was so that they could read over it as they liked as they looked for the different connections. The text would still be read aloud by the facilitator as a means of ensuring that even those who struggled with reading would be able to keep up and stay included in the study. Like in Ujamaa's Contextual Bible Study, the traditional passage of the Widow's Offering, Mark 12: 41-44 is read, and the question, 'What do you think this text is about?' was asked. And the answers were as expected, as they picked up on the woman's generous gift:

- *It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, you just have to be generous and give what you have.*³⁰⁸
- *I think it means that the widow put all her love and trust in God.*
- *We think that the rich people don't really care more than the old person because the widow gave more than actually, she gave all she had, but the rich people only gave a small amount from their large amount.*
- *The poor woman put everything that she had, and she did it all by [her] heart, the rich people did it from their money and wealth (It is here that another child interjected: because they didn't care about Jesus).*
- *The widow put in like 5 pennies, and the others put more. I thought that even though the widow put 5 cents it still made more of a difference than not giving anything.*
- *We all thought that since she only put in a little bit, that's all she had. Since the other people put in lots, they were much richer than her so they had left over, but she put in all she had, even her little.*

³⁰⁷ 1995a. *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Cape Town: International Bible Society. p56-59.

³⁰⁸ Due to confidentiality reasons the names of the children cannot be included. The children's answers were recorded, and have been transcribed verbatim where ever there are italics. Therefore the language and syntax errors have not been edited.

- *I think that she put the least – because the other people put more than her, but she put all her love in.*

After all the children had said what they thought the message of the story was I asked them whether the books in Jesus' time were like the ones that we have now. Through the classes unified, 'No', I heard one young boy saying, 'No, they had scrolls.' Picking up on what the boy said, I showed them what the Book, or Scroll of Mark, would probably have looked like. The prop I had prepared had the whole of Mark printed in continuous columns on stained paper that had then been stuck together, with each ended fastened onto wooden sticks. After clarifying that it would have been hand-written in Greek, rather than the English, I showed them the scroll and asked what the differences were between that scroll and the photocopies of the Bible in front of them. Immediately the lack of the heading, 'Mark' was picked up, the lack of chapter divisions were noted, that the cursive font indicated that it was hand written, and that it was not like the modern book with pages, and so place markers could not be kept in it. In response to a question about the why it was brown and looked like 'old paper', I told the children about papyrus and the lengthy process which was required to make it.

The use of the prop was very deliberate, because, although children at the age of 9 or 10 are capable of conceptualising and inferring meaning about something without anything tangible in front of them, having the object visibly in front of them would re-enforce their understanding.³⁰⁹ The children were quickly able to work out that the chapter and verse numbers had been added to '*make it easier to find things!*' when asked what they thought the purpose of them was. The scroll also gave me an opportunity to explain that the Gospel of Mark would originally have been as one long story, and that we could therefore read parts of the Scriptures together, even if they are separated by a heading – like in this case, the title, 'The Widow's Offering' is placed just before Mark 12: 41. Before the next instalment of the narrative was read, a girl interrupted by putting up her hand stating, '*This story doesn't tell you how or why they are putting things in the Treasury.*' This is another demonstration of critically engaging with the Bible as the child asked questions in order to gain a better understanding of the situation and then make sense of the text. In light of the new

³⁰⁹ Martinez, M., N. Roser & C. Dooley. 2003. *Young Children's Literary Meaning Making*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p224. Fox, C. 2003. *Playing the Storyteller: Some Principles for Learning Literacy in the Early Years of Schooling*. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publications. *ibid.* p189.

interpretation of the Widow's Offering, the child had in fact asked a particularly pertinent question. Affirming her question, and assuring her that that it would be answered as we read on, I decided to continue along with the Contextual Bible Study as had been planned.

Immediately after Mark 12:38-44 had been read, and without any prompting to look for connections or even having had any discussion time, one of the children in the class shouted out, *'It does fit, it does fit together. See it's talking about here, the poor widow, and they say that they smash the widow's houses, and that's kinda all that they had'*, straight after he had said this, another in the class confirmed it saying, *'The stories mix.'* Ujamaa's version of the Contextual Bible Study has to direct readers to this discovery, as it asks, *'Are there any connections between 12:41-44 and 12:38-40?'*, yet this child's open and enquiring reading of the text enabled him to draw links between the *'two stories.'* Catching onto this, the different members of the groups reported back saying:

- *They do it out of their wealth, and that's not true. She's doing it truly – they're not. The others only give for the money and the show. They are not actually doing it for God.*
- *They are putting money in, to see who has got the best money, but the widow just wanted to do it from the kindness of her heart.*
- *The most rich person, takes the money that the others put in. They take down their houses and repossess their things.*
- *I think that the rich people are just putting in a lot of money to impress Jesus, but the poor people are doing it because they love God, and don't have much else to give.*
- *They like to show off that they have lots of money, unlike the poor people. They try to look big.*

Already, without any background information about the Temple or religious leaders, there were individuals and groups who had begun to deduce that the cause of the widow's poverty might be because of the rich.

As planned, information about the scribes was given, relaying how they were the teachers of the law as they were the only ones who could read, write and therefore interpret the Old Testament laws. A brief description of the position of the widow within society was then given. One of the little girls not satisfied with the explanation inquired about why women were not allowed to own their own land, showing her concern for the injustices committed

against people. I explained to her how, in that time, girls were dependent on their fathers until they got married and became reliant on their husbands. And how the Old Testament laws had instructed the people to look after them, but how they had been neglected.

Systematically, the final instalment of the Widow's Offering was added, and the entire passage was read again from Mark 12:38-13:2. The children now expecting the question, which asks what they think the meaning of the text is and whether there are any similarities between them, gave numerous answers, some of which were as follows:

- *Child 1: The small pebbles are like the widow, and the big buildings are the rich people.*

Child 2: So when they crumble, they will spread down evenly.

Child 1: So if they are on top, it looks like they are worth more. But then they are all spread out evenly, because Jesus loves everyone equally.

Child 2: He loves us all the same.

- *We heard that it [the Temple] was where Jesus sat down, and the rich people tried to be better than the widow, because they tried to always take the nice seats and all.*

But they think that they are more important, because they are rich, but to me, God just loves the poor people more than the rich people.

- *We think that the rich people probably built the Temple to show off. And then God is trying to say that they may not show off, and the rocks that are put together to build this Temple, will be broken down. And the rich people will no longer be rich, and the poor people will no longer be poor.*

- *Jesus would rather look up to the poor instead of the rich, will spend more time with the poor.*

Again, the children begin to contextualise the situation, without being directed to do so, as they say, 'We should all be equal, why should they be more important? Just because they have more money?'

Moving to the suggested question, 'How did the Temple function in first century Palestine?'³¹⁰ I felt that it would be important to guide the children through this as I felt that it was unlikely that they would have been exposed to sources which could contribute to

³¹⁰ West, G.O. Draft November 2007. *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*. Produced by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development and Research. p23.

answering this question. In turn, I asked them what they know about politics, then economics and finally religion, supplementing their knowledge with basic information I thought would be useful. The reply to 'what is politics?' was, '*Like a lawyer. Nelson Mandela was a Politician fighting for his country.*' Prior to conducting the Contextual Bible Study, I had decided that I would describe the function of the Temple as being responsible for the jobs of the president, businessperson and priest. One comment which was interesting throughout this interchange as the children's understanding of the separate fields of politics, economics and religion were being developed, was said in response to what the religion was,

It's like the disciples and Corinthians, David and Goliath. David believed that he was not actually less important. David was just a shepherd and Goliath was a big King. So when he, how do I put this? When he took the stone and the sling shot and hit Goliath in the head and he died, everyone thought that he was this great guy, but really he didn't think that. (Another child interjected with: He just thought that he was an ordinary guy) Ya, he didn't think about his highness, but he thought he was normal.

This is an interesting observation, as it shows the child drawing on different sources within the Bible for his theology, following a similar concept of the perception of status which had been the focus of the Contextual Bible Study. Sensing that the children were battling a little with combining the different roles of the Temple, I drew a figure representing the president, priest and businessman, depicting that it was equal to the Temple. Following from the drawing I asked the children, 'Thinking about these different jobs and what these people should be doing, what then should the Temple have been doing? And what was it doing?' While the groups were discussing their answers, one girl asked me, '*Why did the people have to pay to get into the Temple?*' Again this enquiry showed that the child was interested and intent on making sense of the whole story.

Now confident that they had something to add, the representative for each group stood up and reported back, but many of the other children added their own additional contributions – showing that they were excited to explore and engage with the Bible! Their answers were too numerous to record all of them in this study, but some of the more representative answers were:

- *No matter how poor you are, Jesus still loves you.*

- *The rich people thought about themselves, the widow thought about other people. They cared about them. The Temple should treat the widow nicely, because she gave them all she had. Another thing, the Temple is like a tummy, and it's full!*
- *The president should make sure everything is shared equally between the people. But the widow gets less and the rich people get more. The president collects the tax, they take the money and build houses for themselves, which uses up all out tax. So the widow pays for the rich people's homes.*
- *If the priest took money to develop the Temple, then it would be right, but if they just took money to make themselves rich, then it would be wrong. (To this another child responded: I think that the Temple was looking after and taking care of the rich people, and not the poor, because they were going to get something out of taking care of them.)*
- *I think that the Temple weren't looking after the widows and the poor people. That's why it's not easy because there are rich people and poor people and it's supposed to be even. Even-stevens. That's how it should be.*

There were two or three children who battled to comprehend that the political, economic and religious aspects of society, and therefore drew conclusions like,

- *We think that the Temple and the Priest, and the government are all the same. They are all doing God's work. The government and that is spreading the money out equally, and the priest is trying to get the widow to rise up, and not think that they are nothing. (In order to clarify what the child was saying I asked, 'Are they doing that in the story?') The rich people aren't, it says that they will demolish the houses. I don't think that the president gives the widow[er] more, they give them less. And sometimes not at all. The president thinks that the rich people are more important.*

I had decided to leave out the question in the original Bible Study which asked the members to read from Mark 11:27 – 13: 2, in order to get a fuller understanding of the relationship dynamics, because I thought that including this would make the Bible study too long and the children's attention would be lost. I also feared that adding more characters, layers and episodes would be too complicated for the children. But one of the comments, made closer to the beginning of this report back session astounded me. Without being instructed to, the child had read further back on the photocopied page, drawn connections between the various parts of the text, and had finally contextualised the story – all with no prompting!

- *See it says here [pointing further back on the page to Mark 12: 13 which is entitled, 'Paying Taxes to Caesar'³¹¹] that they are paying taxes to Caesar, and Caesar loved to have big and huge houses. He used to live in huge houses in Rome, Greece and sometimes Bethlehem. So he was like Jacob Zuma who builds big houses with our tax, without thinking about the small houses, or big complexes for the small little children and the widowers.*

(Another child expanded on this saying: The reason why we have poor people in the story is because the rich are taking everything away from them and getting more from them.) In other words corruption.

The final question would investigate whether the children could contextualise the story, reading 'in front of the text.' This question was answered, but not as fully, as the children were beginning to get visibly tired and restless, despite this, they still produced some interesting, varied and thoughtful responses. Some of the more representative responses were:

- *We have more money; we should help people.*
- *It is better now, because everyone is working. And women can also work now.*
- *I think that in the old days, the widows and the people and stuff relied on Jesus for protection, but now the president relies on money. So if the president didn't get out tax, what would he be? (Just a normal man, interjected another child.) But he is a normal man, because Jesus treats everybody equally, so he is a normal person, but in his stance he thinks that he is a big king of all. But Jesus is the King of Kings and treats everybody the same.*
- *The rich people must divide their money for the poor, so that it can be even. And so that the children can grow up and get the money and share it.*
- *Don't judge people and help the poor more. Don't judge people because they are poor or of their wealth. Treat everyone equally.*
- *In the old days, I'm not talking these kind of times [pointing to the Bible], the Blacks, Whites and Indians (And coloureds, corrected another child) couldn't come together. But just because of this one man, who was doing Jesus' work, we can come together, just like the disciples, the widows and the rich, in the rainbow nation.*

³¹¹ Marsh, J. 2003. *Early Childhood Literacy and Popular Culture*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p56.

- *It is also like the Native people and the White people. The Whites want more, more than the Native people. The rich want more than the poor and they think that they are more important. Just because they are poor doesn't mean that they're not important too.*

The final closing comment was a little abstract, but definite links between the whole Contextual Bible Study, the warning of the destruction of the Temple and the contextualisation can be seen as the little boy stated, *'It's kinda like the Titanic. When it sunk all the rich people were on it. And the engineers were all the poor people, who had been made to work for the others comfort.'*

5.4 Contextual Bible Study with the Grade 1s

The grade 1 children were equally enthusiastic for the Contextual Bible Study. They were excited to get the photocopies of the 'real Bible' reading portions as I handed out the different pages. Indicating to the children where we were going to begin reading from, I pointed to 'The Widow's Offering' heading, and was quickly met with *'I know what a widow is!'* by one of the members of the Contextual Bible Study. Asking her to expand, she continued, *'It's someone who gets married, but then later doesn't have a husband. I think that they got divorced'*. Correcting the last detail, and telling the group that a widow is a woman who has lost her husband, one of the girls said, *'that happened to my gran'*.

As in the previous group, I began with the traditional reading of the Widow's Offering and asked the children what they thought that the story meant. The grade 1s could identify the basic aspects of the story, but did not draw connections to the context in the way that the grade 4s did. Examples of their answers were:

- *They [the rich people] gave the things that they had. But she gave all that she had.*
- *She gave in all the money that she had. But the other people didn't give in all the money that she had.*
- *The person that put in all the money, she wanted to love God, 'cos God saw her.*
- *God saw her as somebody rich, not somebody poor.*

Even though the children did not focus on contextualising the story, they were eager to know and understand more about the story. One child asked if the money that was collected went to the poor children, which opened up an opportunity for an explanation of the

treasury, and how it was used to fund the functioning of the Temple as well as supporting the luxurious lifestyle of the leaders.

The children once again got excited as I showed them the mock scroll of Mark's Gospel. Like the grade 4 class, they too were able to draw out similarities and differences between the scroll and the 'adult Bible' which they had in front of them: that the scroll has no headings or numbers, that it looked like handwriting, and it was old and dirty. They asked how big the scroll I had showed them was, and if it represented the whole Bible. Unrolling it onto the floor, it became clear to them that it was one long, continuous story, and how it would be read from start to finish. The dialogue which followed revealed how the children were engaging with the idea of the scroll, and how it differed to the modern book or Bible:

Child 1: So it's like a proper Bible. And you keep reading. The next page and the next page. And if you think that you missed a word, you can go back to it.

Child 2: So it's like the other books that we read. Imagine if Roald Dahl came in books like this!

Child 3: Can you imagine the whole Bible like that?!

I then interjected, saying that the whole Bible would not have been written as a single scroll, but that each book of the Bible would be in separate scrolls which would be kept next to each other.

Child 2: Can you imagine the library?

Drawing their attention back to the idea of the Gospel of Mark being one long story, we began reading the story from Mark 12: 38. With only the first verse on the first page, the children were getting confused with the loose sheets and where to continue reading. Noting that this was a mistake on my part, I said to them that if they were getting confused, that they did not have to worry about the pages, but that they were welcome just to listen to the story. About half of the group put down their pages to listen.

The children kept interrupting at places where they were unsure of the vocabulary. They asked what a 'synagogue'³¹² was, as well as what 'devour'³¹³ and 'lengthy prayers'³¹⁴ were. In light of the explanations, they described their understanding of the story as:

³¹² Mark 12: 39

³¹³ Mark 12: 40

- *They would have stolen from the houses. But stolen from the people knowing [what they were doing].*
- *They feel important, they want to feel important. They feel small without their capes, but they want to feel important.*
- *They were showing off.*

Further considering the story, one of the children asked me to explain what ‘poverty’³¹⁵ was, and then why the widow was in this state, ‘*But wouldn’t the widow have the money that her husband left?*’ Using a similar explanation as with the grade 4s, I described the dependence of the women on their fathers and then husbands, and then how they were dependent on their communities to look after them if they were widowed.³¹⁶ In response to this another child asked, ‘*Doesn’t the president look after them?*’

This was the perfect entry into a discussion on the role and function of the Temple in first century Palestine. Knowing that the grade 4s had difficulty in grasping the various functions of the Temple leaders, I introduced the idea from a slightly different angle. Asking the group who our president was, I then asked what a businessman and a priest were. The younger children managed to comprehend that the ‘Temple’s job was to do the jobs of the president, a businessman and a priest. So the Temple leaders needed to run the country, look after the money, and look after the people.’ Asking the set question of, ‘What do you think the Temple should have been doing? And do you think it was doing this?’ Their response was as follows:

- *They wanted to be wealthy!* (Clarifying, I asked: Who wanted to be wealthy) *The businessman, the president and the priest.* (Now probing, I asked: How do you think that they get wealthy?) *By taking the tax!*

Beginning to get distracted by other things, I took the cue and moved to the final segment of the story. After briefly recapping on Mark 12: 38-44, I read Mark 13:1-2, and was met with a ‘*Yoh, Why?*’. The children had been listening. Before answering anything, I turned the question to the group, who came up with the response, ‘*All the rich people spend all their*

³¹⁴ Mark 12: 40

³¹⁵ Mark 12: 44

³¹⁶ See page 83

money and they won't have anything left!' but they were quickly getting distracted – having noticed the sweets brought to thank them for participating.

During a final recap, they summarised the story as, *'In the first part they were showing off. Then where the people were putting in money, and then there was the buildings.'* The children responded with a confident and unanimous *'no'* to whether they thought the Temple leaders had acted the way that they were supposed to. That question, not a part of the original script as it was too directive, may have had an influence on the next question, *'Why do you think Jesus is saying that the Temple is not going to last'*, as the children's response was *'They were being punished because they didn't act the way that they were supposed to.'*

The final question brought a natural close to the Contextual Bible Study, as I asked them to contextualise it. The first, very quick response, *'Yes I see people showing off'* determined the rest of the conversation, as different stories of people who show off were acted out in front of me.

5.6 Observations

This methodology of a more informal or 'natural' style of observing children is becoming increasingly used in child-focused research, as it has now been proven that it creates 'rich and diverse'³¹⁷ responses. Children express themselves through more than just their spoken answers, and so the analysis must consider a broader approach. The children showed that they were able to follow the narrative, construct meaning from it, as well as appropriate the story to their own contexts – obviously the two age groups managed these to varying degrees.

The Contextual Bible Studies demonstrated that children are able to comprehend the 'behind the text' or socio-historical elements of the text, as they could respond to how the Gospel was originally read, as well as the various theories of how society and the Temple functioned in first century Palestine. The children in grade 1 and grade 4 could critically look at the scroll and distinguish the differences between it and the Bible that we are familiar

³¹⁷ Martinez, M., N. Roser & C. Dooley. 2003. *Young Children's Literary Meaning Making*. In *Handbook for Early Childhood Literacy*, eds. N. Hall, J. Larson & J. Marsh. London: SAGE Publishers. p223.

with in the modern context.³¹⁸ The grade 4 class were even able to suggest probable reasons for including the system of numbers and headings. Both sets of children quickly adapted to the idea that each Gospel was a single document, which the author would have expected the 'implied reader'³¹⁹ to read from start to finish. The answers of '*It does fit*' and '*They do mix*' are clear signs of the extent to which the grade 4s established the links.³²⁰ This was not articulated as pointedly by the grade 1 group, although the answer which said that the leaders intended to get rich off other people's money, or '*tax*'³²¹ showed that an idea could be followed throughout the text. Although the initial concept of reading the stories together is categorised as 'behind the text', many of the connections made, such as the references to the widow in each part of the text, fall under the heading of 'on the text'.

The children's ability to critically think 'behind' and 'on the text' was conveyed through the questions which the children had. Some of the enquiries were simply to clarify the meaning of words, while others were asked as a means of investigating the gaps in the story; children questioned areas such as the role and status of widows in their context,³²² the relationship between the widow and state,³²³ and what the treasury was and what the money was then used for.³²⁴ The knowledge gained from the surrounding discussions was then incorporated into the reading of the narrative in order to draw more links and conclusions from the text. This is evident as the parts of the story are interpreted in light of each other, illustrated by a child's suggestion that the Temple was built with prideful motives, which God warns against through his illustration of the Temple's destruction which represents an equalising act among people.³²⁵

There are other instances where the children were able to glean meaning for the narrative itself. Their repetition of the story – even if simply in the case of the grade 1s – indicated that they followed the story. This is supported by the children's perceptions that the characters were '*showing off*'³²⁶ and more so by the grade 4s who were able to give detailed

³¹⁸ See Page 82-83, 89

³¹⁹ Malbon, E.S. 1992. *Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?* In *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. J. C. Anderson & S. D. Moore. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p27.

³²⁰ See page 84

³²¹ See page 90

³²² See pages 84 and 90

³²³ See pages 84 and 90

³²⁴ See pages 83 and 88

³²⁵ See page 83

³²⁶ See page 90

and varied answers to what the meaning of the story was. Even the very first response to the text from the grade 4 class, *'It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, you just have to be generous and give what you have'*, validates this.³²⁷

The children also managed to make associations between the text and their own life experiences. This process of contextualising was more obvious in the older class, although there are hints of it in the younger class. Correlations are made between the modern dynamics between the rich and poor, our President Zuma, as well as perceived gender and race stereotypes,³²⁸ and the selected text. There are distinct relationships which can be traced through the story and the associations. The grade 1 group did not make such clear parallels with the main themes or messages of the *Widow's Offering*, although they did make links between a widow and a widowed grandmother, the Gospel or Bible as one story and novels like Roald Dahl and then the final demonstration of how the 'show-off's in their lives behave as the Scribes did.³²⁹ All of these descriptions of contextualising the text are demonstrations of the children's ability to read 'in front of the text.'

A different aspect, which is still considered 'in front of the text', is to make links from a wider reading of the text or literature. There are a few responses which suggest that children make connections between the different stories – particularly focusing on the biblical stories for this study – and information that they have read or heard. The one obvious example is found as the religious element of the *Widow's Offering* is likened to David and Goliath and David's humble self-image. The other more subtle indicators of this are found in the reference to Caesar's geographical movements, the idea that *'He loves us all the same'* and that *'Jesus is the King of Kings.'*³³⁰

The final aspect of the 'in front of the text' mode of reading to be discussed in this study is the practical implementation. The grade 1 group made no allusion to this aspect. While the grade 4 class established attitudes and perceptions which needed to be implemented, as opposed to devising specific action plans. The children stated that the dispositions held needed to be ones which were non-judgemental, willing to serve others and egalitarian.

³²⁷ See page 82

³²⁸ See page 87

³²⁹ See pages 88, 89 and 90 respectively

³³⁰ See pages 84 and 87 respectively

The children coped really well with the Contextual Bible Study, even though it had been developed with adults in mind. Their eagerness to engage and understand the Bible, and their critical approach was very impressive. There were a number of technical issues which would need to be adapted, should this Contextual Bible Study be used as a means of teaching the Bible, as opposed to being used as a research tool. For example, the best way to convey the concept that the Temple dictated the political, economic and religious arenas of the people's lives in first century Palestine needs to be more carefully thought out. The adapted, second approach was a more helpful model. It is important that the story's layout is in a clear, structured format. The need for this is evident as the grade 1 children battled to follow the text onto the next page mid-sentence. Attention to details, such as starting each new page at a natural break in the story, will be beneficial for children, giving them the greatest opportunity to understand the story without being hindered by indirect elements of the story, such as design layout.

The language level was another noticeable stumbling block for the children. The need to explain so many words would have interrupted their conceptualisation of the story, distracted them from constructing meaning. The use of the 'adult' Bible had been a conscious and deliberate decision, and the children still managed to establish vague connections between the separate parts of story despite the disruptions, but simplifying the vocabulary used would enable the children to read and explore the text more independently. Importantly however, the storyline or plot should not be adjusted in the manner it is in traditional Children's Bibles.

The elements of Christian humanism were also evident in the children's responses to the text. In accordance with de Gruchy's Christian humanist values, through the children's honest interrogation of the text, they recognised that all people have significance, irrespective of how they are perceived by others. The children's responses called for equality and justice. The necessity to contextualise was also present, as the children queried information about the original setting, and then applied the messages which were uncovered to their own present context. Most of the fundamental features of Christian humanism were present in the grade 4s answers, although there were a few characteristics which were not directly mentioned, such as that of 'hope'.

These thought provoking Contextual Bible Studies demonstrate that children are capable of critically and theologically engaging with the Bible. The principles of Christian humanism were particularly present in the grade 4s responses and the children illustrated that they could understand and incorporate the different modes of 'behind the text' and 'on the text' into their understanding of the biblical passage. The practise of reading 'in front of the text' was also present, although not in the decisive manner usually promoted by Contextual Bible Studies and Christian humanism. The Contextual Bible Study on the Widow's Offering has provided evidence that, for the most part, children can critically engage with the Bible to a greater extent than typical Children's Bibles allow.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Explorative Study

This study was an explorative study to determine whether children can critically and theologically engage with the Bible. The intention is that the research and conclusions drawn will raise awareness of this field, and that hopefully this study may then become the base for further investigation. It is unfortunate that there is so little known about the way that this age group interacts with the Bible, for there is such great need amongst so many of the children, and there is great potential within the Bible to meet it. Many of the kinds of hardships and tragic circumstances experienced by children are presented in the Scriptures, but have not been included in Children's Bibles. Owing to this, any potential for the Bible to raise and address these issues is prevented. The central question of this approach was to begin an investigation into what would encourage children to critically and theologically engage with the Bible in order to tap into it as a source of courage and support.

6.2 Current State of Children's Bibles

Before any suggestions on how to write or adapt Children's Bibles to encourage a deeper interaction between children and the Bible, it was necessary to identify the current state and message of Children's Bibles. Christian humanism as described by de Gruchy was selected as the study's theoretical framework, because of its relevant and hopeful principles which seek love, justice and peace. This lens, shown to be representative of the biblical message, can then be used as a standard of what should be included in Children's Bibles. Due to the potentially extensive nature of such a study, it was limited to the story of the Widow's Offering.

The exegesis of the Widow's Offering revealed a message with runs parallel to, and extends on, the traditional reading of the story. By reading a broader section of Mark, and considering the socio-historical characteristics of the time, a warning against oppressive systems emerges, complimenting the teaching of a generous giver. This more comprehensive interpretation, which correlated with the teachings of Christian humanism, is not depicted in the current Children's Bibles. Rather the narratives presented are moral teachings or entertaining stories. It is shown how these renditions of the Widow's offering

are presented in a direct and uncomplicated manner, thereby granting little leeway for the children to engage with the story and characters.

6.3 Children's Response to Including Christian humanism in Children's Bibles

By engaging with scholars working in fields related to child literacy, development and Children's Bibles, various elements of Children's Bibles were reflected on and children's capabilities were affirmed. Encouraging my belief that children are capable of readings which offer more insight, the Contextual Bible Study method was identified as a means of investigating the Children's response to this more complex text.

Through exposing children to the Scriptures in this way, they will have a more accurate idea of the multi-dimensional and often inconclusive nature of the text, and can then begin to develop tools to cope with this. We are doing a disservice to children if we deny them the opportunity to engage with the Bible, for if their experiences of Children's Bibles develop the perception that they are irrelevant and detached, unrepresentative of real life, then they are unlikely to be interested in engaging with the Bible itself as adolescents or adults. Therefore, it is important to find the balance between the providing a version of a Children's Bible which is not only accessible to children, but which remains as faithful a representation of the Bible as possible.

The children, naturally inquisitive, explored many of the different elements of the text which they were introduced to: the literary, socio-historic and contextual features. Although the children did not necessarily devise specific action plans, inspired by the awareness of injustices raised in the text, an understanding of the importance of principles such as equality, love and hope were evident in their responses. By encouraging the questions, and the interrogation of the traditional understandings and assumptions of the text and society, the children are being equipped to critique their lives, Christian traditions and society. It is only through awareness and honesty that issues can truly be addressed.

6.4 Final Conclusion

This was an explorative study which has highlighted the need to further investigate this field of research. The children's enthusiastic response to being invited to explore the different facets of the Widow's Offering, and their astounding ability to draw connections and

construct meaning, suggests that the children's ability to critically engage with the Bible has been underestimated. During this study, this interaction was encouraged by drawing on the principles of Christian humanism and including stories which can be more easily translated into the children's lives. Incorporating a wider selection of biblical dramas, as well as allowing some of the narrative gaps and other literary devices to remain in the narrative written for children will also create the space for children to consider the text, beyond what typical Children's Bibles expect or allow for, simply because they have the opportunity to do so.

This study is only an introduction into a significant and broad field of research. The different methods employed by the various Children's Bibles and narratives can be investigated, exploring whether they capture the teachings of Christian humanism. Further research can also be done with children in different contexts to see how they respond, in order to establish how best the opportunity can be given for each group to engage critically and theologically with the Bible. The discrepancies in the two grades included within this study indicate the need to determine a more accurate idea of the children's abilities; again, as a means of allowing the children to interact with the text as much as possible, without overwhelming them. This is by no means an exhaustive list of suggestions and possibilities. This Master's thesis was conducted with the hope of creating awareness of the reality of children's ability to engage critically and theologically with the Bible, and that this would then prompt scholars to investigate some of these questions further. Finally, this study gives the required recognition to the pivotal role these issues play in forming young Christians' perceptions of God, the Bible and the relevance they hold.

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