

## A Contextual Bible Study on the Crucifixion of Jesus: Engaging the issue of male violence against men

**An Ujamaa Contextual Bible Study based on the work of David Tombs' presentation (and publications): "The stripping of Jesus: sexual violence hidden in plain sight".<sup>1</sup>**  
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In collaboration with David Tombs (and the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago, Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand) the Ujamaa Centre facilitated a workshop on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2019, following the public lecture on the 4<sup>th</sup> June 2019: "The stripping of Jesus: sexual violence hidden in plain sight". The workshop began work on developing a Contextual Bible Study (CBS) in which the issue of (heterosexual) male violence against men was engaged.

The story of the stripping of Jesus is told in Mark 15:15-20, retold by Matthew in 27:26-31, retold by Luke 23:11,16,22b, and retold by John 19:1-3. It is clearly an important episode for each gospel. Mark's account is probably the oldest, and Matthew and Luke base their accounts on Mark. Mark's account reads as follows (American Standard Version, 1995):

**Mark 15:15** Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

<sup>16</sup> The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole *Roman* cohort.

<sup>17</sup> They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him;

<sup>18</sup> and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

<sup>19</sup> They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.

<sup>20</sup> After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His *own* garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.

Matthew clearly uses Mark's story as the basis for his own version (redaction) of the story, but makes important changes:

**Matthew 27:26** Then Pilate released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

<sup>27</sup> Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole *Roman* cohort around Him.

<sup>28</sup> They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him.

<sup>29</sup> And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

<sup>30</sup> They spat on Him, and took the reed and *began* to beat Him on the head.

<sup>31</sup> After they had mocked Him, they took the *scarlet* robe off Him and put His *own* garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

<sup>1</sup> Tombs, David. "Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 53 (1999): 89-109; Tombs, David. "Silent No More: Sexual Violence in Conflict as a Challenge to the Worldwide Church." *Acta Theologica* 34, no. 2 (2014): 142-60.

Luke's account, though based on Mark, is fragmentary, and is clearly constructed to avoid a graphic depiction of the stripping of Jesus, writing as Luke is to a Roman audience.

There are minor redactional differences between Matthew's account and that of Mark, but the most important redactional contribution of Matthew is his naming of what takes place as a 'stripping' (Greek: ekduo). Mark writes that, "They dressed Him up in purple", while Matthew is more overt, stating: "They **stripped** Him and put a scarlet robe on Him". Mark's account implies a stripping, as Jesus is forcibly re-clothed by the soldiers; Matthew is explicit that Jesus is stripped and then re-clothed. Matthew names what takes place as 'stripping'.

Matthew follows Mark with reference to the second stripping, but instead of referring to the colour of the robe (purple for Mark and scarlet for Matthew), Matthew emphasises the robe itself. The colour no longer matters, what matters for Matthew is that once again Jesus is stripped. Mark can be translated as: "they dressed him in purple" (17) and they then "took the purple off him" (20). Matthew is more overt about an actual garment: "they put a scarlet robe/cloak on him" (28) and then "they took the robe/cloak off him" (31).

Mark may well be making an anti-imperial point, for purple was the colour worn by Roman magistrates. Matthew identifies the robe/cloak as that of an ordinary soldier, which was a 'scarlet' robe/cloak.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew, it would seem, given his redactional choices, focuses on the stripping itself, emphasising the multiple stripping of Jesus. For this reason, Matthew is our choice for a CBS on the issue of (heterosexual) male sexual violence against Jesus.

A close reading recognises yet another earlier stripping. Mark (15:15) and Matthew (27:26) make it clear that prior to the public stripping of Jesus there is a scourging/flogging. This would almost certainly have involved Jesus being stripped fully or partially naked.<sup>3</sup>

A careful reading of both Mark and Matthew recognises three public strippings of Jesus. The presentation of David Tombs had emphasised the presence of a "whole Roman cohort". Though there is a lack of clarity on the precise number of soldiers in a cohort, the number was probably about 500. The stripping of Jesus was therefore a traumatic public process in the midst of hundreds of hostile male soldiers. This information, however, is not readily accessible to ordinary readers of the Bible, so how do we offer this information in the form of a CBS question?

The challenge and creativity of a CBS is bringing together in question format resources that enable the detail of the text to be 'read'.

Drawing on the literary-narrative and socio-historical detail of Matthew's story of the stripping of Jesus we have constructed the following **Contextual Bible Study**:

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, T.E. "Mark 15.16–32: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession." *New Testament Studies* 41, no. 1 (1995): 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> Albright, William Foxwell, and Christopher Stephen Mann. *Matthew*. Vol. 26, New York: Anchor Bible, 1971.



## **A Contextual Bible Study on the Crucifixion of Jesus**

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1. Listen to a 'slow' reading of Matthew 27:26-31 in a number of different translations and languages. What have you heard from this slow reading of a well-known story that disturbs you?
2. Who are the characters in this story, and what do we know about each of them?
3. What forms of violence are used against Jesus?
4. Is stripping a man a form of violence? Why do the soldiers strip Jesus?
5. How many times is Jesus stripped? Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was stripped more than once. Re-read the text carefully and identify how many times Jesus is stripped.
6. Is the repeated stripping of Jesus a form of 'sexual abuse'? Discuss in your group what you mean by 'sexual abuse'?
7. Matthew also makes it clear that Jesus was stripped in front of a whole 'cohort' of about 500 soldiers. (The Romans often used sexual violence to humiliate those they conquered and ruled.) What other forms of 'sexual abuse' might have taken place when so many men were involved in the repeated stripping, beating, and humiliation of Jesus?
8. In what situations in your context are men sexually abused by other men?
9. Are there resources in your community and church to address male sexual violence against men?
10. What can we do to address the issue of male sexual violence against men? Devise a specific 'action plan' that you can participate in that will help address the issue of male sexual violence against men?