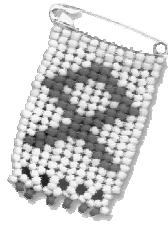


THEOLOGY
IN
THE
HIV AND AIDS
ERA SERIES



MODULE 3

STUDYING THE HEBREW BIBLE
IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

BY

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SERIES EDITOR

MUSA W. DUBE



THE HIV AND AIDS CURRICULUM FOR
TEE PROGRAMMES AND INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA

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NOTE TO LEARNERS, READERS AND USERS

The overall goal of this module is to contribute towards building an HIV and AIDS competent church and theological institutions. This module is part of a series of ten modules entitled, **Theology in the HIV and AIDS Era** which were developed for distance learners. The modules form part of *The HIV and AIDS Curriculum for TEE Programmes and Institutions in Africa*.

The process of production began with an all Africa training of trainers' workshop on mainstreaming HIV and AIDS in Theological Education by Extension (TEE), held in Limuru Kenya, July 1-7, 2004. The workshop called for the production of a distance learning Curriculum and accompanying ten modules to enable the mainstreaming of HIV and AIDS in TEE programmes. Writers were thus identified, trained in writing for distance learners and given their writing assignments. In July 2-13, 2005, twelve writers gathered in the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Botswana with their first drafts for a peer review and quality control workshop. The result of the process is this series on **Theology in the HIV and AIDS Era** and the accompanying curriculum for TEE. The whole process was kindly sponsored by the Ecumenical Initiative for HIV and AIDS in Africa (EHAIA).

Although the target audience for these modules is the distance learning community, it is hoped that the series will also stimulate new programmes, such as diplomas, degrees, masters and doctoral studies in HIV and AIDS theological research and thinking in residential theological institutions. It is also hoped that the series will contribute towards breaking the silence and the stigma by stimulating HIV and AIDS theological reflections and discussions among various groups and occasions, such as in Sunday school, women's meetings, youth and men's fellowships, workshops, conferences and among teachers and preachers of religious faith.

Musa W. Dube

Gaborone, Botswana

July 28, 2006

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GLOSSARY

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome	The last stage of the HIV disease. It is an incurable disease that is caused by a virus that destroys the immune system of otherwise health individuals. It is infectious.
Common Theology		A theology that affirms the legitimated order of 'deed and consequence' that is, 'as a person sows, so shall s/he reap.'
Concordance		A tool that provides all the different places where a particular word in the Bible appears.
Culture		The totality of inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge which constitute the shared bases of social action; the total range of activities and actions of a people.
Discrimination		The unfair treatment of a person, racial group, minority; action based upon prejudice; an act or behaviour which expresses intentionally or unintentionally stigmatising thoughts.
'Embrace of Pain' Theology		A theology born out of the concrete, painful experiences of people.
Epidemic		Any disease attacking a large number of people at the same time.
Exegesis		The process of bringing out the meaning of a text, in this case, that of the Bible.
Exile		The act of forcefully expelling a people-group from their land, e.g., the forceful expulsion of the Canaanites from their land at the hands of the Hebrews.

Feminine	Culturally suitable to the characteristics of a female; possessing qualities or characteristics considered typical of, or appropriate to a female.
Gendered Epidemic	The ancient laws for gleaning state that as farmers reap their crops, the workers were instructed to leave the corners of the fields unharvested, so that anything that fell to the ground was left for the poor, who would glean the lands behind the reapers.
Glean	An infectious venereal disease characterised by the discharge of mucous and pus from the urethra or vagina.
Hermeneutics	The science of interpretation of a text, in this case, of the Bible.
Hierarchy	Refers to the system or organisation of people at different ranks in society, from highest to lowest
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
	HIV causes AIDS. The virus is constantly changing and is classified into two types. These are known as HIV-1 and HIV-2. HIV-1 is the most lethal and common form of the virus and is generally found in Asia, Southern, Central and Eastern Africa, Europe and North America. HIV-2 is less aggressive and is generally found in West Africa. HIV-1 is further sub-grouped into M, O and N depending from which part of the world it is found. Subgroup M is further divided into 11 subtypes of which 4 are responsible for the majority of the infections in Africa. These are subtype A, C, D and E.

HIV Negative	Human Immuno-deficiency Virus	The absence of the antibodies against HIV viral proteins.
HIV Positive	Human Immuno-deficiency Virus	Presence of anti-HIV antibodies in the blood.
Human Sexuality		Refers to the quality or state of being sexual, that is, having capacity to express sexual feelings or engaging in sexual activity; sexuality as a social construction of a biological drive, sex.
Levirate Marriage		This Law of Moses stated that if brothers were living together, and one dies without a son, the dead man's brother married his brother's widow so as to perpetuate the dead brothers' name in Israel.
Masculine		Possessing qualities or characteristics considered typical of or appropriate to a man; manly; unwomanly.
Metaphor		A figure of speech used to refer to something, in order to suggest a similarity, and not sameness. e.g., if I were to say 'you are a lion' it would not mean that you are actually a lion, but that you may possess the qualities of a lion, such as prowess, strength, agility and power.
Patriarchy		A form of social organisation in which the male is the head of the family and descent, kinship, and title are traced through the male line; any society governed by such systems.
Pentateuch		The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the 'First five books of Moses' or Torah ('Books of the Law').
PLWHA		People Living with HIV and AIDS.

Prejudice		An opinion formed beforehand especially an unfavourable one based on inadequate facts.
Prose		Classified as 'ordinary writing' as opposed to 'poetic writing.' The Book of Job contains both prose and poetry.
Rape		Defined as the intentional, unlawful and coercive sexual intercourse, including anal, oral or genital penetration. Coercive circumstances include the application of force, threats and the abuse of power and/or authority.
Social Death		As opposed to physical death, social death is often experienced by People Living With HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) due to the stigma and discrimination associated with the disease.
Stigma		A negative assessment of a person or an action associated with a particular object or issue.
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections	Infections transmitted through sexual activity.
Wisdom Principles		The basic tenet of the wisdom tradition within the Hebrew Bible is that of 'the righteous shall prosper and the wicked shall perish.'
Womanist		As with feminism, a movement which aims to challenge patriarchy, but which takes the issues of race, ethnicity and class as additional forms of gendered oppression.

MODULE 3

MODULE INTRODUCTION

A WORD OF WELCOME

I would like to personally warmly welcome you to this module entitled, *Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts*, which is the third module in *The HIV and AIDS Curriculum for TEE for Programmes and Institutions in Africa*.

Thank you for choosing to study one of the most important challenges to the global Church today. This module is aimed at enabling you to study the Hebrew Bible in the light of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, and how it can speak to us within the complex realities that surround, and, in some cases, sustain HIV and AIDS in the contexts of gender, justice, poverty etc.

During this ten-unit module I intend to help you become a skilled and competent interpreter of the Hebrew Bible for HIV and AIDS prevention; quality care; eradication of stigma, discrimination and gender injustice; and the reduction of the epidemic's impact upon the people and communities that your Church serves. By so-doing, our purpose together will be to produce an HIV and AIDS-competent Church, skilled in training its members and potential Church leaders with a view to expressing its pastoral charge of compassion, justice and healing towards People Living with HIV and AIDS (*henceforth*, PLWHA).

The Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, as Protestant Christians understand it,

contains a total of thirty-nine books. These books are commonly divided into four sections:

- ⌘ Law;
- ⌘ History;
- ⌘ Wisdom (or Poetry);
- ⌘ Prophecy.

From this, it is clear that the size and scope of the Hebrew Bible can be quite daunting to the beginner; hence for this module we will only choose particular texts for interpretation and analysis.

It is difficult to establish the exact dates when the books of the Hebrew Bible were written down. Indeed, it is not important here for us to know all of these details. What is essential is that the books of the Hebrew Bible were written down not as a whole, but were produced in parts over a long period of time.

Have you ever tried reading the whole Bible from cover to cover? It can be a difficult and somewhat intimidating experience; nevertheless, many believers, as part of their regular and disciplined practice follow a carefully selected Bible-reading plan each day, and thereby read through the entire text of the Bible in one year. Those of you, who have read the Bible in this way, will know that the Bible does not read as one complete story. Rather, it soon becomes clear that the Bible is made up of many different strands of thought and various ideas, and that these were written down at different times by different people in different contexts. Much later, these writings were put together as a collection of books by an editor or editors, and hence today we have what is known as the Hebrew Bible or (Christian) Old Testament.

As we begin our study of the Hebrew Bible, we must bear in mind two things:

- ⌘ We will be studying from a particular context of pain and suffering;
- ⌘ Because the Hebrew Bible is a collection of different writings, written at different times by different people, it does not always speak with one voice in regard to the ways in which we are supposed to deal with pain and suffering. What we are interested in here are the ways in which the Bible can speak positively to PLWHA and the affected.

This module is thus divided into five parts and encompasses ten units in all:

1. Defining the problem of HIV and AIDS
2. Hermeneutics and studying the Hebrew Bible
3. Introducing the Hebrew Bible and methods of studying the Hebrew Bible
4. Studying the Book of Genesis in HIV and AIDS contexts
5. Studying the Book of Ruth in HIV and AIDS contexts
6. Studying the Book of Esther in HIV and AIDS contexts
7. Studying the Book of Job: Women and the poor in HIV and AIDS contexts
8. Studying the Book of Job: Suffering, stigma and discrimination in HIV and AIDS contexts
9. Studying the Book of Hosea in HIV and AIDS contexts
10. Studying the Book of Ezekiel in HIV and AIDS contexts

I trust that you will find this an interesting module, which you are encouraged to read through with an open mind.

MODULE OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this module you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Identify** and explain the problem of HIV and AIDS
- Understand** the different methods of studying the Hebrew Bible in ways that are sensitive and which speak to our contexts of HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ **Use** and apply these methods in understanding selected Biblical texts
- ⌘ **Learn** how to work within broader theological models such as liberation or feminist understandings of the Bible

ACTIVITIES

Throughout this module, you will find a number of activities, self-assessments, assignments, tests and a final examination paper. Please make sure that you attempt them all. Before you begin, obtain a notebook in order to write down the answers to all your activities and other assignments.

UNIT 1

DEFINING THE PROBLEM OF HIV AND AIDS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the first unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. In this unit you will be exposed to the scope, magnitude, impact and the human links that surround HIV and AIDS, not only towards our communities, but also our faith and our theologies. We will thus begin by describing the current situation of the HIV and AIDS epidemic and then go on to show why we need to study the Bible (particularly the Hebrew Bible / Christian Old Testament) in ways that are sensitive towards our HIV and AIDS contexts.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⦿ **State** the scope, magnitude and impact of the HIV and AIDS epidemic
- ⦿ **Describe** the impact of HIV and AIDS on the individual's body
- ⦿ **Describe** the impact of HIV and AIDS on family, community and country
- ⦿ **Explain** the link between social injustice and HIV and AIDS

- ⌘ **Explain** why an HIV and AIDS sensitive study of the Hebrew Bible is important

TOPICS

- ⌘ The scope, magnitude and impact of the HIV and AIDS epidemic
- ⌘ HIV and AIDS impact on the individual's body
- ⌘ HIV and AIDS impact on family, community and country
- ⌘ The link of HIV and AIDS with social injustice and the marginalised
- ⌘ The scriptural authority of the Hebrew Bible and the HIV and AIDS question
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

THE SCOPE, MAGNITUDE AND IMPACT OF THE HIV AND AIDS EPIDEMIC

Let me begin by attempting to reveal to you how big the problem really is. The statistics are frightening to say the very least. In South Africa, my own context, there are approximately 1,500 new infections per day.



ACTIVITY 1



1. *What are the HIV infection rates in your own country?*
2. *What is its growth rate?*
3. *How many people are living with the virus and how many children are said to be orphaned?*

Everyday, we hear such frightening statistics. In South Africa, we are told that if the epidemic continues to go unchecked, 10 million South Africans will have died from AIDS-related infections by the year 2010. Approximately 5,000 infected babies are born each month. This situation touches us all, whether we are infected or affected. The situation is such that our work force is being eroded daily due to absenteeism. Some statistics suggest that 15% of government service employees in South Africa are either HIV-positive or living with AIDS. Recently, At my husband's place of work they were asked to give voluntary anonymous blood test samples so that the company could gauge how much of their work force were HIV-positive, and thereby ascertain appropriate courses of action to educate and assist People Living With HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) with better health care etc. Of the 650 or so employees, approximately 15% were found to be HIV-positive. This is indeed a huge number and seems to mirror the situation in most other places of work as well.

HIV AND AIDS: HOW IT IMPACTS ON AN INDIVIDUAL'S BODY

HIV is an acronym for *Human Immunodeficiency Virus*. Although HIV can be spread through the transfusion of blood or breast-milk, its primary means of transmission is through sexual contact, that is, the exchange of bodily fluids through sexual contact. This is why HIV and AIDS is often called a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI).

You might be wondering why we define HIV and AIDS differently. Are they not the same condition?

Although HIV does lead to AIDS, when one says that someone is HIV-positive it does not mean that they have AIDS. What it does mean is that they have a virus that will eventually lead to AIDS.

So what is AIDS?

AIDS is an acronym for *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. When one has AIDS it means that the body's immune system has failed or is beginning to fail. HIV, on the other hand, is a virus, that begins to weaken the immune system, but with proper nutrition, healthy lifestyle and medication, can be controlled so that its eventual progression to AIDS can be significantly delayed.



ACTIVITY 2



1. *What are the names that people in your country/culture give to HIV and AIDS?*
2. *In your culture, what are some of the things named as causes of HIV and AIDS?*
3. *Do you agree or disagree with the perspective of your country? Give reasons for your answers?*

HIV AND AIDS IMPACT ON FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY

First of all, it needs to be emphasised that every member of a family is affected when one person is infected with HIV. This is due to several reasons, which we will name below:

a. Financial

If the person infected is an adult who earns an income, the family very often suffers due to the loss of valuable income if that person cannot work any longer due to illness. The added medical expense also places a strain on the family and its finances. Furthermore, in many homes, the primary caregiver is also forced to give up work, thereby leading to deeper poverty in the family.

b. Emotional and Physical

Besides the financial implications, there are also the emotional and physical consequences, as it is often the family members who have to take care of those who become ill; this duty, more often than not, falls to the female members of the family.

c. Psychological

In addition, there are also psychological and emotional stresses. These often accompany the stigma that people still attach to People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) and their families.

Every member of the family is affected. The community and country at large are affected in many ways, but particularly economically. I have already mentioned how countries such as South Africa, who are only recently finding their feet economically, are affected by absenteeism in the workplace due to AIDS-related illnesses, not to mention the number of skilled workers who have already died and many more who will yet die as a result of HIV and AIDS. It is clear therefore that HIV and AIDS affects the entire family, and by association, the community and the country at large.



ACTIVITY 3



1. *Write down how people in your family, community or church, have been affected by sick people?*
2. *Write down the stories you have heard about People Living With HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) and how they have been coping.*
3. *Write to your community leader(s) making suggestions on how to assist PLWHA.*

HIV AND AIDS LINK WITH SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND THE MARGINALISED

The HIV and AIDS epidemic in South Africa, and particularly Southern Africa, goes much deeper than simply being a health issue. At the heart of the matter are beliefs about sexuality, worldviews regarding gender and colonialism; poverty, homelessness and unemployment; the legacy of apartheid and its connection with migrant labour and the uprooting of communities and families, and the list goes on.

How, you may ask, does gender inequality for example, relate to HIV and AIDS? What is the connection? Why has HIV and AIDS been called a 'gendered epidemic?'



ACTIVITY 4



1. *Can you think why HIV and AIDS has been called a 'gendered epidemic?' Before looking at some of the possible answers below write down some of your own answers*
2. *How many answers were you able to come up with?*

The reasons why HIV and AIDS has been called a 'gendered epidemic' are many and varied. Let us now explore some of them:

a. Psychological

It has been proven that women are more susceptible to the disease, not least because of the ways in which women's anatomies function. In other words, physiologically it is easier for a woman to be infected with the HI-Virus than a man, because she is the recipient of bodily fluids. Semen also has a longer period in the woman's body, bringing with it a greater chance of infection.

b. Social

Socially, women often do not have decision-making powers nor do they have (sexual) control over their own bodies.

c. Patriarchal Relationships

Many women live in, and are still part of, patriarchal relationships, where it is difficult to negotiate safer sex, particularly within marriage where sex is considered a man's right, and refusal of sexual intercourse could result in violence towards her.

d. Pregnancy and Child-birth

A pregnant woman who is HIV-positive risks transmitting the virus to her child, either during the pregnancy, through the exchange and transference of bodily fluids during the birthing process, or after the birth through breastfeeding.

e. Sexual Violence

The scourge of sexual violence against women and girl-children, which has always been a part of our society, but in recent times, has increased due to widely circulated and dangerous myths that sex with a virgin, can cure AIDS. This has put women and girl children at even greater risk of contracting the disease.

f. Patriarchal Societies

Many women in traditional patriarchal societies either are not allowed, or do not have the means to receive education, and therefore are educationally disadvantaged in terms of finding employment. Some, out of sheer desperation, resort to finding employment as commercial sex-workers. In most national contexts, sex work is illegal, and therefore it again becomes difficult for women to negotiate safer sex, as they simply have no rights.

I could make a long list of reasons why women are more vulnerable to HIV and AIDS, but I think it is sufficient here to notice that women make up the largest group of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA), whether in their roles as caregivers or as the infected.



ACTIVITY 5



Write down other factors, beside that of gender, which contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS

Linked to the social injustices that contribute to HIV and AIDS are issues of class and race. These are intricately connected with issues such as colonialism,

apartheid and globalisation. People, particularly in Africa, have been rendered landless and poverty-stricken through the affects of colonialism and globalisation. When one looks at the connection between economic indicators and history, one gains a clearer perspective of why HIV and poverty are so inter-connected.

Current World Bank figures indicate that the average state health-care spending on an African person is US\$14 a year, compared to US\$2,673 for the average American. These low-spending figures have not always been the case with African countries. The reason it is currently so low is that African countries are inevitably in debt as a result of globalisation/neo-colonialism. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (controlled mostly by the United States of America and other rich western countries) insist on African governments reducing their spending on social and welfare programmes (healthcare being one of them) before they are able to get further loans. As a result, each day, more people in Africa are dying from AIDS-related diseases because national governments have reduced their fiscal budgets on healthcare.

It has been said that in wealthier nations such as the United States of America, AIDS has become a chronic rather than a terminal disease. It is common knowledge that chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension etc., can be controlled through proper nutrition and adequate medication. As both of these are unavailable in most parts of Africa due to poverty, people are dying each and every day from a disease that is indisputably linked to the history of oppression.

SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY OF THE HEBREW BIBLE AND HIV AND AIDS QUESTIONS

How can the Hebrew Bible speak to us, given the situation described above? More importantly, why is the Bible important at all?

Recent studies have shown that the Bible is very important to African Christians. In fact, Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu once joked that even if the colonisers stole the land and left African people with the Bible, Africans were better off for having the Bible! Many people may not agree with this statement, but it nevertheless shows how important the Bible is for the people of Africa.

In addition to its importance as a sacred book of scripture, the Bible is also a book of comfort and resources for daily living for African Christians. People look to it for daily inspiration. It is not uncommon for people to read a verse or a chapter each day for encouragement and comfort.

The Bible is also used as a guide for daily living and spiritual direction. In other words, when Christians are faced with moral dilemmas they are likely to reach for the Bible to see what it has to say about the challenge they are facing. Often, when we go to the Bible, we go to it with pre-conceived ideas and biases, and sometimes there are a whole host of factors that affect the way in which we interpret the Bible.

Finally, the Bible is also considered a holy book capable of magical powers in and of itself. For example, Mercy Amba Oduyoye tells the story of how some people in West Africa place Bibles in babies' cots because they believe it will protect them from evil and malicious spirits.

John Mbiti, one of Africa's leading theologians, tells the story of an African doctoral student, who after graduating abroad, returns home:



QUOTATION

He learned German, Greek, French, Latin, Hebrew, in addition to English, church history, systematics, homiletics, exegesis and pastoralia, as one part of the requirements for his degree. The other part, the dissertation, he wrote on some obscure theologian of the middle ages. Finally, he got what he wanted: a doctorate in theology... He was anxious to reach home as soon as possible, so he flew, and he was glad to pay excess baggage, which, after all, consisted only of the Bible in the various languages he had learned, plus Bultmann, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Buber, Cone, Küng, Moltmann, Niebuhr, Tillich...At home, relatives, neighbours, old friends, dancers, musicians, drums, dogs, cats, all gather to welcome him back. The fatted calves are killed; meat is roasted...[He] is the hope of their small but fast-growing church. People bear with him patiently as he struggles to speak his own language, as occasionally he seeks the help of an interpreter from English.

Suddenly there is a shriek. Someone has fallen to the ground. It is his older sister, now a married woman with six children and still going strong. He rushes to her. People make room for him, and watch him. "Let's take her to hospital," he calls urgently. They are stunned. He becomes quiet. They all look at him bending over her. Why doesn't somebody respond to his advice? Finally a schoolboy says, "Sir, the nearest hospital is fifty miles away, and there are few buses that go there." Someone else says, "She is possessed. Hospitals will not cure her!" The chief says to him, "You have been studying theology overseas for ten years. Now help your sister. She is troubled by the spirit of her great aunt." He looks around. Slowly he goes to get Bultmann, looks at the index, finds what he wants, and reads again about spirit possession in the New Testament. Of course he gets his answer: Bultmann has demythologised it [i.e. according to Bultmann such a thing does not exist in reality]. He insists that his sister is not possessed. The people shout, "Help your sister; she is possessed!" He shouts back, "But Bultmann has demythologised demon possession! [It does not exist]."



ACTIVITY 6



- Having read the above story, think how it can relate to the ways in which we view the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible, in the light of our HIV and AIDS contexts.*
- 1. Write down your thoughts and meditations.*


Your activity question and the story should have led you to make at least the following conclusion. At the present time, one of the most pressing challenges facing the African continent is the HIV and AIDS epidemic. It seems that as the student was unable to respond appropriately to the context, we too are unable to respond meaningfully to the HIV and AIDS context. This is due to the fact that we have been socially trained to look at the world in dualistic terms (this is to say, in terms of either good or bad, black or white). These are essentially Western forms of interpretation and theologising. When HIV and AIDS stares us in the face, and death is all around us, it is very clear that these forms of interpretation are insufficient of themselves to provide adequate or satisfying answers.

In the above story, it was clear that even though the graduate's sister was demon possessed. Everyone around her, even those with no theological education, could see it. Yet, this graduate could not, because he was intent on believing what he had learned from Bultmann, and Bultmann said that it did not exist! It is the same with Christians' reactions to HIV and AIDS. If the Bible says that good people do not suffer, then they think that it is impossible that those infected with HIV could be good or innocent. They suffer because they are bad.

This is what a dualistic understanding of the world does to people's understanding of HIV and AIDS. It renders them impotent to respond

meaningfully to the crisis which has now reached epidemic proportions, because they are stuck in a dualistic way of thinking.

With regard to HIV and AIDS, the Bible has been used extensively to suggest that AIDS is a punishment from God. Dorothea Scarborough makes this point in a recent issue of a theological journal:



QUOTATION

In most cases AIDS is the result of denying God and disobeying His [sic] commandments. It is the outcome of apostasy. It is not primarily a health problem, but a heart problem. For the human heart which frees itself from God also casts off all restraints. It seeks to gratify the self and enter into sin.

It is not uncommon for statements such as the above to be made in our churches. As a result, passages such as Deuteronomy 28 which deal with the subject of blessings for obedient behaviour and curses for disobedient behaviour are often cited as sufficient justification for the idea that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God.

It is thus clear that the Bible plays a very important role in either providing comfort to People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) or the affected, or as a weapon to further victimise those who are already sick and suffering.

Because the Bible is an authoritative text in the lives of most Christians and because (particularly) in Africa, the Bible is considered to be the “Word of God,” sometimes the Bible can be interpreted in ways that are oppressive to PLWHA and the affected.



ACTIVITY 7



1. *In your culture, how are people with HIV and AIDS characterised?*
Write a short letter to your pastor or faith leader, making
2. *suggestions as to how to break the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS.*

In the light of the rather dangerous possibility of stigma and discrimination emanating from the Church and Church-leader's Sunday sermons, it is important for us to take a critical look at the Hebrew Bible so that we can avoid perpetuating the evil of stigma and discrimination against those who suffer. As we shall see in the units that follow, we can find within the pages of the Hebrew Bible a compassionate and a loving God who seeks to liberate those who suffer rather than a tyrannical God who punishes those who are deemed to be sinners.

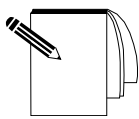


SUMMARY

I trust that this unit has been intellectually and spiritually stimulating for you. My aim was simply to familiarise you with the scope and magnitude of the crisis of HIV and AIDS and to show you how the epidemic is linked with other phenomena as well. I did this by providing you with some statistics, and then went on to offer you some medical facts of how HIV affects our bodies, and more importantly, our communities. The link between HIV and AIDS as a result of social injustice, particularly towards women, was also highlighted. I also pointed out that HIV and AIDS is also linked to other factors such as race and class. Finally, I gave a cursory look at the way the

Bible is often used negatively towards HIV and AIDS, producing untold stigma and discrimination and not life!

In the next nine units in this module we will discover together ways of interpreting the Hebrew Bible which takes an informed and empathetic cognisance of the epidemic that is killing thousands of people on our continent each and every day.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. *Briefly describe the impact and magnitude of HIV and AIDS in Africa.*
2. *List some of the reasons why HIV and AIDS has been called a 'gendered epidemic.'*
3. *How is HIV and AIDS linked to race and class?*
4. *Provide at least three reasons why it is important to re-read the bible in the context of HIV and AIDS.*



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UNIT 2

HERMENEUTICS AND STUDYING THE HEBREW BIBLE

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the second unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. In the first unit I defined the magnitude of the problem of HIV and AIDS and also showed how the Bible is used negatively to impose further stigma and discrimination upon People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). In this second unit we will explore together how the same Bible can be read to provide hope, compassion and love to those who suffer as a result of HIV and AIDS. In order to do this there are specific methods of studying the Bible that we will employ so that the Bible can speak to us at our point of need. When we begin to use these methods to interpret the Bible what we are doing is called the science of interpretation known as hermeneutics.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ✂ **Define** hermeneutics as a key to unlocking interpretation of the Bible
- ✂ **Name** the two parts that make up hermeneutics and explain each of their functions
- ✂ **Identify** the three major categories of hermeneutics

- ⌘ **Describe** each major category of hermeneutics and its function
- ⌘ **Explain** why the three categories of hermeneutics are relevant to our purpose and show how they can be used

TOPICS

- ⌘ Overview of the topic
- ⌘ Defining hermeneutics
- ⌘ What is hermeneutics?
- ⌘ What is exegesis?
- ⌘ What is interpretation?
- ⌘ The three major categories of hermeneutics
- ⌘ Historical criticism
- ⌘ New criticism
- ⌘ Reader-response criticism
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

DEFINING HERMENEUTICS

a. What is Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics (from the Greek word *hermeneia* which means speech or interpretation) is the study of the ways in which we arrive at meaning or interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics studies how we interpret the Bible or how we get meaning from the Bible. There are two parts to hermeneutics:

- ⌘ Exegesis;
- ⌘ Interpretation.

b. What is Exegesis?

Exegesis is a Greek word, which means 'to bring out.' In biblical studies it is used to mean, 'bringing out the original meaning from the text.' Exegesis is therefore the process of examining a text to see what its first readers would have understood it to mean. The various sets of activities that the hermeneut (or the interpreter) performs on a text to extract meaningful interpretation is therefore known as exegesis.

In order to provide an example of exegesis let us examine for a moment a text in the Book of Ruth:

When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of a heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, 'Who are you?' And she answered, 'I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin' (Ruth 3:7-9 NRSV).

In order to exegete (bring out the meaning of) this text we have to find out what this phrase, "spread your cloak," meant in Biblical times. There are a number of ways to do this.

One way is through a Bible concordance. A concordance provides all the different places in the Bible where a particular word appears. If you have a study Bible you should find a concordance at the back. Hence, if we want to find out how and where the phrase "spread your cloak" is used in other parts of the Bible, we can look it up in a concordance. We will then come up with, for example Ezekiel 16:8 which contains a similar phrase where a marriage

covenant is made between Yahweh (the name of God in the Hebrew Bible also known as Jehovah) and Israel:

I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age of love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the LORD GOD, and you became mine (Ezek. 16:8 NRSV)

The Hebrew word translated 'cloak' in these two passages is *kanaph* and literally translated means 'wing' or 'skirt.' When used in this phrase, it usually has a sexual connotation. Once you have established that this is the way in which the phrase was understood in its original setting, you can then go to the next phase of hermeneutics, namely, interpretation.

c. What is Interpretation?


Interpretation is a second step in hermeneutics. Interpretation simply means that once a text has been exegeted (that is, discovered what the text meant to its original audience or in its original setting) one moves on to ask the question: what does that mean for us today? This is interpretation.

Biblical interpretation asks how an ancient text can speak to us today. To use the example above, what does it mean that Ruth is the one who is inviting Boaz to have sexual relations? Is she only inviting him to a sexual relationship or does the phrase "for you are next-of-kin" imply something more? Is she proposing marriage?


Depending on the type of hermeneutics we choose to employ, we might come up with different answers to the question posed above.

- ⌘ A feminist hermeneut/interpreter might argue that Ruth is a strong woman, who knows what she wants and goes after it. In a patriarchal world where a woman's value is counted through marriage and child bearing, she has to secure both these things and this is her only way of getting it. This means that women today are also called to be strong, because some women still live in patriarchal (male-dominated) societies.

- ⌘ A Marxist hermeneut/interpreter (an interpreter who focuses on the issues of class and the divide between the rich and the poor) would want to note the economic conditions of Biblical times which forced women, and particularly widows into what might be perceived as dangerous situations. A Marxist hermeneut/interpreter might argue that in many places in Africa today widows are still in similar situations due to prevailing cultural laws.



ACTIVITY 1



1. *From your cultural point of view, how would you interpret the actions of Ruth?*
2. *How would you respond to Ruth's approach in this era of HIV and AIDS? Give reasons for your answer.*

I have purposely kept my description of hermeneutics somewhat simple. In reality, there are varieties of hermeneutics, but the basic principles are the same as described above.

Although hermeneutics is bipolar (that is, consisting of two parts) it can also be further divided into three major categories.

THE THREE MAJOR CATEGORIES OF HERMENEUTICS

a. Historical Criticism

The first category is historical criticism. This method was developed to try and understand what the original author meant. It was assumed in this method that if one could discover the intention of the author, one could find the meaning of the text. As a result, this method tends to focus more on the exegetical part of hermeneutics (that is, trying to find the original meaning of the text, by focusing on the author's world and the author's intention).

Some of the associated criticisms of this method are source, form and redaction criticisms. All of these assume that meaning rests in the original text, its author and its *sitz im leben* (setting in life).



ACTIVITY 2



1. *Given that we are trying to do a hermeneutical study of the Hebrew Bible from a HIV and AIDS sensitive perspective, can you state whether or not this method might be helpful?*
2. *Can you state the reasons why or why not?*

By constantly trying to prove what lies behind the biblical text, or the motives that lie behind the biblical text, the scholar might alienate the community that reads the 'text as text.' This is because when a faith community reads the Bible they are not so much interested in who wrote a particular text, or in which period of history it was written. Rather, they read it in order to give meaning for their lives today. As scholars of the Bible became aware of this they

decided to find another category of hermeneutics to address this concern. This category came to be known as New Criticism.

b. New Criticism

New Criticism was different from historical criticism. Whereas historical criticism was 'author-centred' that is, focused on the identity and the world of the author, New Criticism focused on the text on its own. This category is therefore a text-centred approach. Scholars refer to this phase as the 'New Criticism phase' or 'Structuralist phase.'

According to New Criticism, the author's intentions are not important considerations for interpretation, because the literary work or text itself is sufficient. In other words, the text is a literary entity which can stand on its own. As a consequence, an extremely close and careful reading of the text is demanded.

The reader must give attention to the various literary and linguistic relationships within the text. This means that, for example in the Ruth text used above, one must examine the way in which Ruth speaks to Boaz, her mannerisms, her tone of voice, her choice of words, etc. One would not be concerned whether or not Ruth was a historical character (that is, whether she really existed or not), or be concerned with whether the author was writing in the period after the Exile. One is simply concerned with the details of the 'text as text.'



ACTIVITY 3



1. *In the light of the objectives of this module, can you state whether or not this method might be helpful?*
2. *Can you state the reasons why or why not?*

I personally like New Criticism's stance against the historical method (as the only 'correct' method of interpretation), but I worry about New Criticism's focus on the text itself as a stable and closed entity. In other words, I would want to say that in the same way that we as hermeneuts (interpreters) cannot be satisfied using only historical criticism with its focus on authorial intention, (as this will not help us find meaningful interpretation for the era of HIV and AIDS in which we live) we also cannot be satisfied using only New Criticism with its focus on the text as an independent and stable entity. This is because historical criticism (with its focus on the author) and New Criticism (with its focus on the text) ignores one more important aspect of the process of interpretation, namely the reader!!!

You as the reader are very important to the process of interpretation. Your context also has a bearing on the way in which you interpret a biblical text. Being aware of this problem, scholars developed yet one more major category of interpretation, namely, reader-response criticism.

c. Reader-Response Criticism

The third major category of hermeneutics is called a Reader-centred Criticism. Whereas the first approach focused on the author, and the second on the text, this third approach focuses on the reader. This method holds that different readers approach the biblical text differently and hence interpret differently.

To use the Ruth example again, a woman who has been raped might be extremely cautious of Ruth going to the threshing floor at night and making such a request. A male pastor reading the text might only focus on the end result of Ruth marrying Boaz and might not see the danger in the method she uses to ensure this. Hence, the reader is not innocent. S/he brings to a text a vast world of experience, presuppositions, methodologies, interests and competencies.



ACTIVITY 4



In the light of the objectives of this module, can you state whether or not Ruth is behaving ethically? Give reasons for your opinion.

This last category is very important because it takes the reader and her/his context seriously. When one is living within a context that is overflowing with problems relating to HIV and AIDS, then the reader's context becomes of paramount importance.

The main point that we need to remember throughout this module is that reading and interpretation are not innocent activities. Each person approaches the text with particular biases; but bias is not always a bad thing. It is important to remember that when we read and interpret the Hebrew Bible in

the light of HIV and AIDS, we are interpreting ‘from a particular place,’ and that the Bible may not always say things we want it to say. As a result, need then to find ways of interpreting the biblical text in ways that promote life.

For the purposes of this module, we will hold that a good hermeneut/interpreter is one that is able to hold an integrated approach to meaning. In other words, while acknowledging that the world of the Biblical text is important, and that understanding Biblical history is important, we also affirm that making the Bible relevant for our African context is also very important and that good scholarship means negotiating a fine-line between these two worlds.



ACTIVITY 5



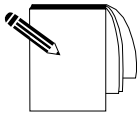
In your own words briefly describe the characteristics of each of the three major categories of hermeneutics.



SUMMARY

Congratulations! You have come to the end of unit 2. I hope that you have enjoyed our study together. The aim of this unit was to familiarise you with the concept of hermeneutics and its usefulness to our purpose of reading the Hebrew Bible in a way that is sensitive to our HIV and AIDS contexts. The important thing is that you have understood that hermeneutics is a science of interpretation and that when we begin to interpret a text we are employing hermeneutical principles.

Secondly, hermeneutics consists of two phases, namely, exegesis, which is employed to try and find out what the text meant in its original context; and interpretation, which is an exercise in applying the text to our current context. Finally, within these two phases of hermeneutics there are three major categories or methods. These are Historical-critical Criticism, New Criticism and Reader-response Criticism.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. *What is your definition of hermeneutics?*
2. *Give an explanation of two components of hermeneutics.*
3. *Name the three major categories of hermeneutics.*
4. *Describe in detail each of the major categories of hermeneutics.*
5. *Explain why the three categories of hermeneutics are relevant to our purpose.*
6. *Show how these categories of hermeneutics can be used.*



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UNIT 3

INTRODUCING THE HEBREW BIBLE AND METHODS OF STUDYING THE HEBREW BIBLE

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the third unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. In this unit we will explore the story-world of the Hebrew Bible. I shall introduce you to the four broad groups of the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible; namely:

- ⌘ The Law;
- ⌘ The Writings;
- ⌘ Wisdom;
- ⌘ The Prophets.

The Jewish tradition divides these into three categories, rather than four. These are:

- ⌘ The Pentateuch (Hebrew: 'Torah');
- ⌘ The Prophets (Hebrew: 'Neviim');
- ⌘ The Writings (Hebrew: 'Ketuvim').

Consequently, the Hebrew word for Bible is 'TaNaK' (=Torah+Neviim+Ketuvim).

The Christian tradition divides the writings into two further groups. The first category is the Historical writings and the second, the Wisdom writings. In this module we will use the Christian categories.

The Hebrew Bible has been read and studied for many thousands of years by Jews and Christians alike. Many methods have been developed to study its text. In unit 2, I introduced you to a broad understanding of interpretation as hermeneutics. In this unit I will 'fine-tune' this a little more and introduce you to some of the methods of hermeneutics which have been developed by Biblical scholars to read the Bible in a particular way for liberation.

There are many methods which have been developed, but for our purposes I will only introduce you to three, namely:

- ⌘ Literary hermeneutics;
- ⌘ Liberation hermeneutics;
- ⌘ Womanist hermeneutics.

Finally in this unit, we will examine how each of these methods of hermeneutics will enable us in our effort to read the Hebrew Bible in a way that is sensitive to our HIV and AIDS contexts.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Identify** the ways in which the books of the Hebrew Bible are divided into sections
- ⌘ **Name** the different sections of writings which the Hebrew Bible is divided into

- ⌘ **Explain** and describe what literary hermeneutics, liberation hermeneutics and womanist hermeneutics are
- ⌘ **Describe** why all the above methods are important for an HIV and AIDS-sensitive reading of the Hebrew Bible

TOPICS

- ⌘ Overview of the topic
- ⌘ Introducing the Hebrew Bible
- ⌘ The Pentateuch
- ⌘ The Historical Books
- ⌘ The Wisdom Books
- ⌘ The Prophetic Books
- ⌘ Hermeneutics and methods of reading the Hebrew Bible
- ⌘ Literary hermeneutics
- ⌘ Liberation hermeneutics
- ⌘ Womanist hermeneutics
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

INTRODUCING THE HEBREW BIBLE

Christians refer to the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament because to Christians it is the first part of the Christian Bible, the New Testament being the second testament. As I said in the introduction, the Hebrew Bible is not one book written by a single author, but rather it is a collection of very old texts written and edited and then re-written by many authors over a long period of time, sometimes many hundreds of years.

The setting of the Hebrew Bible is the ancient Near East (or Middle East), extending from Mesopotamia in the northeast (modern day Iraq) down to the Nile River of Egypt in the southwest.

The Hebrew Bible tells the story of the Hebrew people or Israelites as they are also known. It contains different parts, which:

- ⌘ Set down laws for the Israelites to follow;
- ⌘ Describes the history of the Israelite peoples;
- ⌘ Uses narrative and poetry to illustrate the condition of the Israelite people;
- ⌘ Describes the prophets and their critique of the practices of Israel and its theology.

a. The Pentateuch (Torah)

The Pentateuch (Greek: 'five scrolls') or 'Torah' (meaning, the books of the law) is made up of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Pentateuch ('Torah') contains the laws for living and rituals for the Israelites thereby demonstrating how they should live ethically. It also explains the origins of the human race and the way in which the Israelites were saved from slavery in Egypt. Moses is the main character in most of the books of the Pentateuch. Traditionally, he was also assumed to be the author of the Pentateuch, although scholars have shown in recent times that this cannot be true for many reasons, not least of which is the relating of Moses' own death at the end of the Pentateuch, and because Moses is also spoken of in the third person as a great man of God.



ACTIVITY 1



In your own words, write down what you know from the books of the Pentateuch which can be related to HIV and AIDS. For example, I think that the story of the liberation of the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt can be related to the God of liberation who also wants to liberate us from suffering rather than condemn us in this era of HIV and AIDS.

b. The Historical Books

The historical books are made up of the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. These books are called the 'Historical Books' because they continue the story of the Israelites from the death of Moses to the fall of Jerusalem.



ACTIVITY 2



Write down one thing which you remember from the history of the Israelites from the time of Moses death to the fall of Jerusalem, which can be related to the HIV and AIDS epidemic. For example, I think that the situation of death and the subsequent helplessness of Ruth as a widow can be related to the issue of HIV and AIDS in our context (Ruth chapters 1 and 2). Can you think of another issue?

c. The Wisdom Books

The books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon all have one thing in common. They are written in a poetic style. The Book of Psalms is a collection of songs and poems, some of which are still used in the worship life of the church today, similar to the way they were used in ancient

Israel. The other books are sometimes grouped together under the broad category of 'wisdom.' Wisdom books are those books which tend to give advice on how to live and try to make sense of the problems and suffering which people undergo. Job is an example of a book that deals extensively with the issue of suffering. Proverbs provides wisdom on how to lead a life that is pleasing to God, while Ecclesiastes reflects on how meaningless and futile life can sometimes be. The Song of Solomon was written to celebrate the love between a man and a woman.



ACTIVITY 3



Choose one book from the wisdom books and write down what you remember about it that may be relevant to HIV and AIDS. For example, I think that the Book of Job is related to HIV and AIDS because of its concern with how the righteous can also suffer

d. The Prophetic Books

The Prophetic books are concerned with the lives, oral statements and messages of the prophets of God who lived at different times in Israel's history. The books of the prophets are not arranged according to the dates and the times in which they were written. Their order is as follows:

- ⌘ The Three Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah (who is associated with Lamentations), and Ezekiel;
- ⌘ The Book of Daniel;
- ⌘ The Twelve Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.



ACTIVITY 4



Choose one book from the prophet books and write down what you remember about it that may be relevant to HIV and AIDS. For example, I know that in the Book of Amos it speaks about caring for those most vulnerable in society, which I think can apply to People Living With HIV and AIDS (PLWHA)

HERMENEUTICS AND METHODS OF STUDYING THE HEBREW BIBLE

In this section, we will explore the different types of methods and hermeneutics of reading the Bible. Although there are many methods and hermeneutics, we cannot go through them all here. For this reason, I have only chosen three types, namely:

- ⌘ Literary hermeneutics;
- ⌘ Liberation hermeneutics;
- ⌘ Womanist hermeneutics.

a. Literary Hermeneutics

Before we begin, can you remember the meaning and practice of hermeneutics? In unit 2 we said that hermeneutics basically means the science of interpretation. What then is literary hermeneutics?

When we employ literary hermeneutics to study the Bible, what we are doing is looking at the Bible as literature. As Phyllis Tribble has written:



QUOTATION

To study the Bible as literature is to recognise, not prove, that it is indeed literature.

Source: Phyllis Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, p.8.

The Bible, in addition to being regarded as a religious text or as the 'Word of God,' has also long been regarded as literature; hence as Tribble argued over twenty years ago, it does not need to be proven as literature. When we look at a literary text we look for those things we would look for in any novel, story, or narrative. In other words we ask questions such as:

- ⌘ What is the theme of this text?
- ⌘ What is the plot of this text?
- ⌘ Does the way in which the plot is structured affect the ways in which we interpret the text?
- ⌘ Who are the main characters in this text?
- ⌘ What are the roles of each of the main characters in this text?
- ⌘ Do all the characters receive equal attention or time in the text? Why or why not?

In this module we will be employing a literary hermeneutic as a method of interpretation. We do this because the literary method, as we have already said in unit 2 is more accessible to communities of faith and people who read the Bible everyday for inspiration, rather than as a scientific book that needs analysis.



ACTIVITY 5



In your own words, state why a story-telling method is helpful when reading the Bible in the HIV and AIDS era?

b. Liberation Hermeneutics

The African-American theologian James Cone once wrote:



QUOTATION

It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors.

Source: A Black Theology of Liberation, Second Edition. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990, p. 31.

This makes me think about my own faith community, where many people struggle in order simply to survive. When, for example they read Psalm 23 they read it as a source of comfort; they see it as speaking directly to their own life situation, especially since they themselves feel as though they “walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” much of the time – in other words their interpretation is informed by their life experience. It matters little to them who the authors of the Psalms were or the time period in which the Psalms were written down or even what the Psalms may have been intended to mean by their authors.

When we read the Bible from a liberation perspective we read it from the point of view of the poor, the marginalised and oppressed. We want to see if the bible has anything to say to those who find themselves in similar

situations. Liberation hermeneutics has its roots in Latin America and also in African-American history, as well as during the South African liberation struggle. Liberation theologians used the story of the Exodus in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus' relationships with those who were the most oppressed in society as a starting point for their own hermeneutics. Hence, when one reads the bible with a liberation hermeneutic in mind, one asks questions such as:

- ⌘ Who are the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised in this text?
- ⌘ How are they characterised?
- ⌘ Do we hear their voices? Why or why not?
- ⌘ What are their views of God?
- ⌘ What is God's view of them?



ACTIVITY 6



Remember in unit 1 we spoke about how HIV and AIDS are linked to issues of race, class and gender? In the above section I showed how Psalm 23 can be read in the era of HIV and AIDS for liberation. Can you think of a text that may also be related?

c. Womanist Hermeneutics

Alice Walker says that a womanist is "a black feminist of colour." She goes on to say that "feminism is to womanism as purple is to lavender" (Walker 1983: xi-xii). This means that womanism is like feminism in many respects. If this is so, why do Black and African-American women want to name themselves differently?

Black and African-American women have done this because they think that feminism does not make race and class as important an issue as that of

gender. In every other respect womanism is the same as feminism; hence I thought it appropriate to use womanism since we are dealing with the African context. Womanism like feminism is also a movement which aims to challenge patriarchy (a system of domination of males over females) by trying to attain the same social, economic, and political rights and responsibilities to those possessed by men.

How then can womanist hermeneutics help us in our purpose to read the Hebrew Bible from a HIV and AIDS sensitive perspective?

In unit 1, we established a link between gender and HIV and AIDS by showing that the largest majority of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) are women. As with liberation hermeneutics, womanist hermeneutics also asks particular questions of a text:

- ⌘ Where are the women in this text, and what roles do they play?
- ⌘ Are the women's voices heard? Why or why not?
- ⌘ Are the women treated differently from the men?
- ⌘ Are the women poor? Are they ethnically different?

When one embarks on a womanist reading of a text, one is first suspicious of the text because of the fact that it might be patriarchal, or that it could be used in a way that oppresses women. If the text is patriarchal, it is important to ask if there ways in which it can be read beyond the boundaries of patriarchy. In other words, are there still positive aspects that one can gain from the text? Finally, how can one apply the text to the lives of women who live in today's world, particularly in this era of HIV and AIDS?

These three stages of womanist hermeneutics can be summed up in what I call the PAP (Polemical, Appropriative and Projective) model. These three

ideas were conceived by Itumeleng Mosala (1993:6), even though at the time he did not name it so.

⌘ **The Polemical Stage:** We acknowledge that the Bible does not always speak from the perspective of the oppressed. (For example, the way in which Hagar and Ishmael are treated in the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 21).

⌘ **The Appropriative Stage:** Although the Bible may be oppressive in certain ways, it also contains positive examples for liberation. These need to be re-claimed. (For example, the same passage of Genesis 21 also shows that God took care of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness).

⌘ **The Projective Phase:** The goal of our interpretations must be to transform the church and society (For example, the story of Hagar and Ishmael may illustrate how the system of patriarchy destroys individuals, it being the system that made Sarah feel so desperate as a childless widow that she gave Hagar to Abraham; it was also the system of slavery that did not give Hagar a choice regarding Abraham and Sarah's rules. We can thus use this story to transform our societies that still keep these pejorative systems in place.



ACTIVITY 7



In the above illustration of the PAP model I have used the example of women and class oppression. Take another text related to HIV and AIDS and do a similar reading.

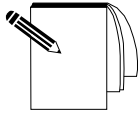


SUMMARY

Congratulations! You have now reached the end of unit 3. Let us take some time to reflect on what we have learnt in this unit.

First, we established that the Hebrew Bible is made up of many important parts, namely, the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Wisdom Books and the Prophetic books. We said that each of these sections deals with a particular issue in the life of Israel's history. We also learnt that the literary method asks literary questions of the text, such as those concerning plot, structure and characters. We said that this was a helpful method to use for our purposes since we want to make a difference in our faith communities by finding positive ways of reading the Bible in our contexts of HIV and AIDS.

Liberation and womanist hermeneutics were also presented as important methods for reading the Hebrew Bible, because they too deal with contexts of oppression. As we learnt in unit 1, HIV and AIDS are intricately linked with contexts of oppression, especially with regards to race, class and gender. In the next seven units which follow, we will seek to analyse and interrogate specific biblical texts using some of the methods we have learnt in this unit.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. Name the four sections into which the Hebrew Bible is divided.
2. Identify one book, or story in each of the sections, stating in your words how it can be related to HIV and AIDS.
3. Explain what literary hermeneutics is, detailing why this method is important to our purpose.
4. Explain what liberation hermeneutics is, detailing why this method is important to our purpose.
5. Explain womanist hermeneutics, stating why this method is important to our purpose.



FURTHER READING

- Abrahams, Yvette. 2001. Learning by Doing: Notes towards the Practice of Womanist Principles in the 'New' South Africa. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 1/50, 71-76.
- Dube, Musa W. ed. 2001. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. SBL: Atlanta.
- Dube, Musa W. and Musimbi Kanyoro. eds. 2004. *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

UNIT 4

STUDYING THE BOOK OF GENESIS IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the third unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. I trust that you have had a good journey so far and that you now have a good understanding of the crisis of HIV and AIDS, as well as an overall awareness that the Hebrew Bible can be read in a way that are sensitive to these contexts by using particular methods of hermeneutics which various biblical scholars and theologians have developed.

In this unit we will begin to apply the hermeneutical (interpretation) methods which we have learnt about in units 2 and 3. We want to apply them to particular texts in order to gauge how they can be read and re-read to bring hope, counsel and comfort in this era of HIV and AIDS.

In our study together, we will only examine the first three chapters of the first book of the Pentateuch, Genesis. We will begin with a brief overview of the Book of Genesis. Then we will look at the creation stories which show God's purpose for humanity – that is, God created women and men for fullness of life, to enjoy equal abundant life. Following this, we will explore both of the creation stories found in Genesis 1 and 2 and reveal equality between the sexes. After each study we deal with the implications of these stories for HIV and AIDS.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Define** the importance of the term 'myth' and state its importance for our interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in this era of HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ **Explain** the purpose and the origins of the Book of Genesis
- ⌘ **State** the differences between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2
- ⌘ **Demonstrate** how Genesis 1 shows equality between the sexes and its implication for a more sensitive understanding of HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ **Show** how Genesis 2 displays equality between the sexes and its implication for a more sensitive understanding of HIV and AIDS

TOPICS

- ⌘ Brief overview of the Book of Genesis
- ⌘ Introducing the creation narratives
- ⌘ Two creation narratives
- ⌘ The order of the creation narratives and HIV and AIDS discrimination
- ⌘ Re-interpreting the creation accounts for empowerment
- ⌘ Creation account no. 1: Genesis chapter 1
- ⌘ Creation account no. 2: Genesis chapter 2
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

The English name 'Genesis' derives from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint). In Hebrew, Genesis is taken from the first word in the Book of Genesis known as '*bereshit*' meaning, 'in the beginning.'

The Book of Genesis can be divided into two parts:

- ⌘ Chapters 1 - 11 deals with the creation, the fall of creation, the destruction of creation (through the flood, Noah's story) and the scattering and dividing of humankind into many languages and nations (the story of Babel);

- ⌘ Genesis, chapters 12-50, has aptly been called the patriarchal narratives. Patriarchal comes from the word 'patriarchy' which is derived from the Greek and Latin words, '*archy*' meaning, 'rule,' and '*patri*' meaning, 'father.' Literally translated, patriarchy means 'rule of the father.' Recently, the word patriarchy has taken on a wider meaning, referring to the domination of males over females and all other beings, but we will return to this later on in our studies together. For now, it is important to know that Genesis 12-50 tells the story of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's favourite son, Joseph.

INTRODUCING THE CREATION NARRATIVES

It is important to note at the outset that although many Christians believe that the stories related in Genesis are historically true and that they did actually take place, this is not always very easy to prove. For example, scientists have

asked the question, if the story in Genesis about a world flood is really true, why does Genesis not talk about dinosaurs? Scientists have now proven beyond a shadow of doubt that these animals existed and yet they are not described in Genesis. Now, it is not my intention here to go into the debate of whether these stories are historically true or not. I would rather view these stories as myth, and this goes for all the stories we will deal with here. I understand that most of us, including people like myself, are people of faith, hence, when we hear the word 'myth,' we sometimes get the 'heebie-jeebies' because we think that our faith is being questioned. Before you get worried about the word 'myth' as meaning something false, let me clarify.

I use the word 'myth' in the same way that African grandmothers and scholars of religion use the term. In other words, 'myth' is neither true nor false. We start with that assumption: the story of the flood, of creation, the life of Abraham etc., may or may not have actually taken place. However, it does not matter. What we are interested in here, and in this whole module, are the way in which these stories were told and the purposes for which they were told. That is to say, what are the stories meant to teach us? What messages do they have for us?

It is obvious that these stories were preserved to order our lives in some way. For us to understand where we came from and what our purpose on earth is. It is like the stories that are told in African folklore, such as the story of how the leopard got its spots, or how the hare fooled the hyena. No one doubts or questions the historicity (that is, whether they really happened or not, or that animals were really talking, discussing and also planning matters) of these folktales. People simply accept the stories as life-lessons, that is, as stories meant to teach us something more about ourselves and those around us – human lessons. In that sense, Genesis is a history book. It tells the life stories of many important people, such as, Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel; Noah;

Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob; and Joseph and his brothers. These life-stories are meant to teach us certain lessons about our own humanity, and about God. Bearing this in mind, let us now move on to examine what messages these stories about the ordering of creation and humanity can tell us in an era of HIV and AIDS.



ACTIVITY 1



Have you ever thought about how you approach the stories in Genesis? Have you ever asked yourself questions about these stories, but you were scared to answer them because you thought that it would be a bad reflection on your faith. Write these 'awkward' questions down and see if they can be resolved through the method of looking beyond the story to its central message. In other words, state whether and how looking at the story as a myth helps.

a Two Creation Narratives

Did you know that two stories of creation are found in the book of Genesis?



ACTIVITY 2



- 1. Read Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Now, on a piece of paper draw a line down the middle and tabulate the differences between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.*
- 2. What do the differences in the two accounts say to you?*

Coming back to Genesis and the creation accounts, if you undertook the exercise required of you in activity 2 you will realise that there are several differences between the two accounts of creation. We are not interested here

in the 'nitty-gritty' of those differences. That is to say, we are not interested in this section in minor details such as whether the earth was created in six literal days or in one day. The important message we are meant to take away is that God created the earth – right? But there are also certain differences with the way in which the stories have been presented that might have caused people to see the roles of people and the earth differently. In an era of HIV and AIDS, it is important that we understand these differences so that we can make informed choices as to how we interpret the Bible.

Because most people have not recognised that there are indeed two stories, many Christians have picked only parts of the message from each story, and lost the more important messages contained within these separate accounts. The main point of the creation stories is that the creation of human beings and all living things is an indication of God's love for and towards us all.

b. The Order of Creation and HIV and AIDS Discrimination

The most important and basic understanding of the first creation story is that when God created humankind (Adam), God created them male and female (Gen. 1:27). The second most important understanding is that God created both male and female in God's own image. Hence, in the first creation story narrative of Genesis 1 there is no superiority, because God has created both male and female together. There is no story of a rib, nothing about who was created first and who was created second. It also very clearly states that both male and female were created in the image of God.

In the second creation story found in Genesis 2, in most translations of the Bible, the female (Eve) is created after the male, to be his 'helper' (Gen 2:18 NRSV). She is taken out of his rib and not created together with him.

What do all these things have to do with us who are reading the Bible in our HIV and AIDS contexts? It has more to do with us than you may think! Let us reflect on what I said in Unit 1 in our introduction about the link between HIV and AIDS and women. I said that the prevalence of HIV and AIDS among women is very high because, amongst other factors:

- ⌘ Women do not have decision-making powers nor do they have control over their bodies;
- ⌘ Many women live in and are still part of patriarchal relationships where it is difficult to negotiate safer sex, particularly within marriages where sex is considered a man's right, and refusal of sexual intercourse could even result in violence towards her;
- ⌘ The scourge of sexual violence against women and girl children, which has always been a part of our society, but in recent times have increased due to the widely circulated dangerous myth that sex with a virgin can cure AIDS has actually put women and girl children at even greater risk than ever before of contracting the disease;
- ⌘ Many women in traditional patriarchal societies either are not allowed, or do not have the means to receive education, and are therefore economically and educationally disadvantaged in terms of finding employment. Some women, out of sheer desperation resort to finding employment through commercial sex work. In most contexts, commercial sex work is illegal; therefore it again becomes difficult for these women to negotiate safe sex, as they simply have no rights.



ACTIVITY 3



In the light of the above, explain why HIV and AIDS has been called a 'gendered epidemic'

What then, does HIV and AIDS have to do with the creation stories? It has a lot to do with it! The creation stories are at the heart of our Christian faith. Remember we asked the question before about the purpose of these stories. What then, is the purpose of these stories? The purpose of these stories is to tell us why we were created and for what purpose we were created. In other words, how is it that we came to be on this earth? If we believe that our lives on this earth are ordered in a particular way and that males have a God-ordained purpose to rule and dominate over females, this impacts every aspect of our lives:

- ⌘ The belief that one gender is superior to the other or has authority over another, has direct bearing on the fact that women are denied access to education (and are therefore economically and educationally deprived);
- ⌘ Women are raped (because men feel that it is their right to claim sexual prowess, because God has given them dominion over a woman);
- ⌘ Women do not have control over their own bodies (because men feel that women were created from men's bodies therefore, women's bodies are dependent on men).

All of these ideas can be gathered from the creation stories, and have ensured for many centuries that women are kept under men's authority.

The HIV and AIDS epidemic has called us to look at these texts in a new light. Because women are dying each and every day at a disproportionate rate (that is, more women than men are dying of HIV and AIDS) we have to wonder whether these creation stories have not been misinterpreted or interpreted with bias against women. We have to re-look at these texts in order to find a positive meaning in them so that this bias does not go further, and that men and women will realise their equality and thereby take the first steps towards,

finding a more holistic solution to this epidemic that is ravaging our continent.



ACTIVITY 4



Give three reasons why it is important to find equality in the creation narratives, especially in our HIV and AIDS context.

REINTERPRETATION OF THE CREATION NARRATIVES FOR EMPOWERMENT

When we study the Bible it is important to let go of some of the pre-conceptions we have about certain texts, in this case the creation narratives.

Certain things we may have learned from our Sunday school days can be so deeply ingrained in our minds and so cherished as the truth that no-one ever thinks to question them. If I had to ask you to quickly answer the question: Who cut Samson's hair, what would you say? Many of you would instantly say Delilah - right? Actually Delilah did not cut Samson's hair! She simply told the Philistines that the secret of Samson's power lay in his hair (Judg. 16:4-21). Many such beliefs have been around for centuries or even thousands of years and they are part of the very roots upon which we base our beliefs and lives.

Sometimes, however, when we take a closer look at the text and we read the text from a deeper perspective we will find new ideas that may force us to go back to the foundations of what we believe and change them.

a. Creation Account No. 1: Genesis Chapter 1

Genesis 1:26-27 simply states:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (NRSV).



ACTIVITY 5



Before we go on, write down in your own words your understanding of this passage.

It is very clear from these three verses, that God created human beings as male and female. Two important facts can also be gained from this story that will help us to read these texts in way that is edifying (builds us up) in our contexts of HIV and AIDS:

- ⌘ Both male and female were created equal in God's image. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.'" (Genesis 1:26 NRSV) The word which is often translated "man" is often used in many Bible translations to refer to a singular male. As with the

New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), it should rather be translated 'humankind' thereby describing the human race as a whole and not a singular male.

- ⌘ Both males and females were created in the image of God. Why is this important to our HIV and AIDS contexts? It is important because when we acknowledge that both males and females were created in the image of God, we recognise the value of both sexes. We see the likeness of God in each person.
- ⌘ When we see God in a person, we will not harm that person because that will mean that we harm God. How can we abuse women, because to abuse women would therefore mean abusing the image of God, because she too has been created in the image of God?
- ⌘ How can a man rape a woman in the belief that it will cure AIDS, if she is in the image of God, for it will mean he is raping the image of God?
- ⌘ The Hindu religion has a philosophy called *Atman*. *Atman* refers to the all-pervading soul in both the deity and humankind. Hindu's believe that *Atman* is in every living creature. To harm another living thing is to injure oneself and thereby injure God. Hindu's thus greet each other with the words *Namaste* which has been said to mean 'the God in me recognises and greets the God in you.'
- ⌘ We find here in the creation story a similar understanding even though we do not claim equality with God, we believe that we are *all* created in the image of God; therefore to harm another person is to harm God.

There is also another important understanding of this in our HIV and AIDS contexts. Recently, we were having a discussion in our staff tea-room. Someone had said that if the blood of Jesus was HIV positive, we need to show compassion. Someone on our staff who is HIV positive said that she needed the blood of Jesus to be HIV negative so that it could provide hope for

her. These are important statements, for they assert that God in Christ knows and feels our pain as human beings.

I have twin sisters who are identical to one another. In fact, they are so identical that even my father could not tell the difference between them sometimes. The most fascinating thing about them is that they have often spoken about their ability to feel pain when the other is hurting. For example, when one of them was in labour with her first child, the other insisted that she had felt some birth pangs as well! This is what it means to be in the image of God. It means God hurts when we hurt, because we are created in God's image and likeness. This is a powerful message that compels us to express compassion towards People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) and the affected. If God can feel our pain and know our suffering and is one with us, who are we to judge others instead of feeling compassion and love? What makes us better than God in this situation?

The second important point we get from this story is that the man and woman were given equal authority:

- ⌘ It does not say that the man was given authority over the woman. Rather, it says "and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth (my own emphasis) (Genesis 1:26).
- ⌘ Equal authority is granted to both the man and the woman. It does not say let the man only rule. Rather, it says let them rule. Women are thus also given authority to make decisions.
- ⌘ This means that women can choose to have safer sex, because that choice does not rest with a man alone. It is not his job to rule over her.

- ⌘ It means that women own their own reproductive choices (their ability to have children); it is not simply the choice of a man.
- ⌘ It means that women have a choice, because they too have been given authority.



ACTIVITY 6



Take time to reflect on what we stated above. It might have shaken the roots of some of what you believe in. Nevertheless, write down in one paragraph the new understanding that you have gained from interpreting this first account of creation in the context of HIV and AIDS.

b. Creation Account No. 2: Genesis Chapter 2

Having studied the first account of creation, it becomes clear that it reveals the inherent equality between the sexes. The question still remains, however, as to where generations of Christians got the idea that men have authority over women.

This idea comes from the second account of creation to be found in Genesis 2:7 and 2:18-21, which states:

Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being...Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and

to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken' (NRSV).

From this passage, generations of Christians have understood the need for inequality between the sexes. There are three issues that are of importance for us here:

- ⌘ The idea that God took a rib from Adam to make Eve. This is another story that we have gained from our Sunday school days. A rib seems to be a fairly insignificant part of the body. Some people, however, seem to have the understanding that females must be inferior because God used one small part of a man's body to create a woman.
- ⌘ An analysis of the Hebrew word '*tsela*' has shown that through its minor mistranslation as 'rib', more than a thousand years of misunderstanding has occurred. Even the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) which we are using in this module has mistranslated the word.
- ⌘ If we look closely at the Hebrew word '*tsela*' we will find that it is used in a number of other places in the Bible where its meaning is very different from the word 'rib.' Daniel 7:5 is the only other place where we find the English word rib, and that is translated from another Hebrew word, not '*tsela*.'
- ⌘ If '*tsela*' is not a rib, what is it? If God did not take out a rib, what did God take out? God took one of Adam's sides - a side - a side is different from a rib!



ACTIVITY 7



Read Daniel chapter 7 and see if you can make out the way in which the word 'tsela' is used there.

How do we know this? Remember we said in unit 2, if we want to find out the meaning of a word, it helps to look in a concordance. (Remember a concordance is a tool that is found at the end of some Bibles, or on its own, which helps locate all the places in the Bible text where a particular word appears).

If we look in a Hebrew concordance (or, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, London: Hodder and Stoughton), we will find many places where the word 'tsela,' appears in the Bible. In the places where it appears, it means, – you guessed it – side. Look for example at Exodus 26:26. Here we read of one side ('tsela') of the tabernacle and the second side ('tsela') of the tabernacle. In 1 kings 6:34 it speaks of two sides of a door ('tsalim' – the masculine plural form). There are many other verses like this in Job and elsewhere, but I think I have made the point adequately.

To sum up: the word 'tsela' has been mistranslated as rib, and therefore has given women less significance throughout many centuries. The word 'tsela' should be translated 'side.' The implication of this is that God divided Adam in half to create a woman. (Even though pastors and preachers sometimes like to assert that man has one less rib, or that woman has one more rib, which of course is medically untrue. Men and women have the same number of ribs as each other!)



ACTIVITY 8



Take time to read the bible passages mentioned above to see again how the word 'tsela' is used

What does this mean for us in our HIV and AIDS contexts?

- ⌘ Women are equally important as men;
- ⌘ Women constitute half of humanity and consequently are as fully human as men;
- ⌘ This means that HIV positive people are also fully human;
- ⌘ It means that God did not intend hierarchy (one to rule over the other), or one person to think that they are better than the other, as some HIV negative people think of HIV positive people;
- ⌘ It means that we all share in humanity together.

The second major issue that emerges from this passage is the idea that a woman is a 'helper' (Gen. 2:18 NRSV). This again has also been taken to mean that women are in some way inferior to men. Again, the Hebrew words used to describe this 'helper' is '*ezer kenegdo*.' If we look at our concordance again we will find that in the Hebrew Bible the Hebrew word '*ezer*' means not just aid, but a significant kind of help. For example, in Isaiah 30:5, the word is used in the sense of seeking military help from the king of Egypt. It is also used in the same way in the Book of Ezekiel. Military help can hardly be described as an inferior role!

What is even more interesting is that the most uses of this word are in relationship to God. See for example, Deuteronomy 33:29:

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph (NRSV).

Compare also the Book of Psalms etc. Most times, people are seeking 'azar' (help) from God! Does that make God inferior? Of course not! Why then, do we treat women as inferior because their function is that of a helper?

Finally, the Hebrew word 'kenegdo' can be translated 'suitable,' meaning an equal, or 'someone who will suit you and be compatible to you.'



ACTIVITY 9




Read the Bible passages mentioned above and take notice of how the word help ('azar'/'ezer') is used.

This old story which we learned in Sunday school can now take on a new meaning in the era of HIV and AIDS in which we live. An era which places women in a more vulnerable situation because of those false interpretations of Biblical texts which state they are designed inferior by God! From what we have studied above, we can reclaim these texts in order to empower women, thereby showing them that they too can make decisions, that they too have rights, that they too are equal.


The third major issue is that the inferior place of women is further intensified by Genesis 3, when one reads about the fall of humanity. Often the woman (Eve) is blamed for the sin. However, if we read the text carefully we will find that:

⌘ Both man and woman were co-responsible for the Fall;

- ⌘ Adam was no less responsible than Eve (Read Gen. 3:6 carefully);
- ⌘ The punishment of Adam ruling over Eve was a result of the sin of the Fall not the original created intention;
- ⌘ For Christians the story does not end here! Within the New Testament we have the story of redemption through Jesus Christ. This implies that redemption is more important than the Fall. If redemption is more important than the Fall, then this punishment obviously does not apply;
- ⌘ Because of redemption through Jesus Christ, women can be free to exercise their equality which God had originally intended for them.



ACTIVITY 10



Take time to reflect on what has just been said. As with our re-interpretation of Genesis 1, it might have shaken the roots of some of what you believe in. Nevertheless, write down in one paragraph the new understanding that you have gained from interpreting this second account of creation in the context of HIV and AIDS.



SUMMARY

We have now reached the end of unit 4. Let us take some time to reflect on what we have learnt in this unit.

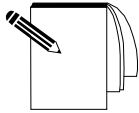
First, we established that there are five books which make up the Pentateuch, but, due to time constraints we were only able to examine a few passages from Genesis to illustrate how the Bible can be read in a way that is positive to PLWHA, the affected and the vulnerable.

We then did an overview of Genesis and came to an understanding that the stories we read in the Bible such as the creation stories have a profound effect on the ways in which we understand our humanity and of our purpose on earth. This in turn has a powerful impact on the strategies that are available to women to cope in the contexts of HIV and AIDS.

Because women make up the largest group of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) as a result of the inequalities in our societies, it was important for us to find equality in the Bible. This begins with the creation stories.

Finally, we undertook a detailed examination of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, and a brief analysis of Genesis 3, to show that God intended equality for the sexes.

We concluded each section with why this is important for us in our HIV and AIDS contexts, by highlighting the link between gender injustice and HIV and AIDS.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. *Define the word 'myth' stating its importance for our interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in this era of HIV and AIDS.*
2. *What is the purpose of the Book of Genesis?*
3. *What are the differences between Genesis chapter 1 and Genesis chapter 2?*
4. *Explain what you have learnt from the new interpretation of Genesis chapter 1 and how this has enabled you to read the Bible more sensitively in relation to HIV and AIDS.*
5. *Explain what you have learnt from the new interpretation of Genesis chapter 2 and how this has enabled you to read the Bible more sensitively in relation to HIV and AIDS?*
6. *State why divine punishment from the consequences of the Fall does not apply to Christians.*



FURTHER READING

Ackermann, Denise. 2004. *Tamar's Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of HIV/AIDS Pandemic*. In *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*. Edited by Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro. Maryknoll: Orbis.

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UNIT 5

STUDYING THE BOOK OF RUTH IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the fifth unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. Thus far, we have explored the magnitude of HIV and AIDS, the various methods we can use to interpret the Bible in the HIV and AIDS contexts, and in the last unit we practiced how this is done by interpreting the creation narratives with these methods. In this unit we will examine how widows are treated in the HIV and AIDS contexts, through an examination of the Book of Ruth. We will then move to an analysis of a particular situation of widows in the Hebrew Bible, and a practice called Levirate marriage. Finally, through an analysis of Ruth chapter 3, we will show how certain cultural practices force women into dangerous situations particularly in HIV and AIDS contexts.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⚓ **Describe** what the situations of widows are in the current contexts of HIV and AIDS in Africa
- ⚓ **Explain** the purpose and the origins of the Levirate marriage law

- ⌘ **Analyse** the first three chapters of the Book of Ruth using a literary hermeneutic
- ⌘ **Demonstrate** through examples how certain Biblical cultural and economic practices can be harmful in the context of HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ **Illustrate** through examples how certain contemporary cultural and economic practices can be harmful in the context of HIV and AIDS

TOPICS

- ⌘ Brief overview of the Book of Ruth
- ⌘ The situation of widows in HIV and AIDS contexts
- ⌘ The Levirate marriage law
- ⌘ Studying the Book of Ruth
- ⌘ Ruth 1: Ruth the Widow
- ⌘ Ruth 2: Ruth the Breadwinner
- ⌘ Ruth 3: Ruth the Seductress
- ⌘ Economic injustice, culture and HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF RUTH



ACTIVITY 1



Before we study an overview of the Book of Ruth, I would like you to read the entire Book of Ruth. Don't worry! There are only four chapters!! Having done this, I want you to write down a brief summary of the Book of Ruth. Please note that this exercise is very important, as you will be at a loss in the rest of this unit if you have not undertaken this task.

Now that you are familiar with the book, let us study a brief background to the book.

As with most books in the Hebrew Bible, it is not easy to establish a date for the Book of Ruth. What we do know from the internal evidence (that is, evidence within the book itself) is that the Book of Ruth was written at the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1). Scholars have tried to show therefore that the book was probably written at the end of that period, but no-one has been really certain about its date.

Closely linked to the date of the book is its purpose. You may ask what the purpose of a book has to do with its date. Because we are not certain of the dating of the book, if we can figure out the purpose of the book, we may be able to find the approximate time in which it was written. Almost all scholars agree that the book was written to justify the Moabite ancestry of David. Moabites were considered 'outsiders' in Israel. The laws found in Deuteronomy 23:2-4 clearly show this. Scholars therefore argue that if a great king such as David had Moabite ancestry then it needed to be justified. The Book of Ruth is therefore a justification for this, as Ruth is portrayed in a very positive light. It is also clear that although Ruth was a Moabite she married a very devout Israelite and therefore David's Moabite ancestry is justified. To this end, the book that bears Ruth's name has nothing but praise for her.

Some scholars say that if this was indeed the purpose for the book, then the earliest time that it could have been written was around the time that David was made king, or at the very the latest when David was at the height of his time as a king. Scholars base this information on the genealogy of the Book of Ruth that is found at the end, which does not name Solomon. It ends with David.

Irrespective of whether we can establish a date for the book or not, the important point I would like you to remember is the idea of ancestry, and bearing male sons. This is an important theme that runs throughout the book, and it is certainly an important one to remember in order to interpret the book in its context.

THE SITUATION OF WIDOWS IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

a The Story of Mbewe's Wife

In the hours after James Mbewe was laid to rest three years ago, in an unmarked grave not far from here, his 23-year-old wife, Fanny, neither mourned him, or accepted visits from sympathisers. Instead, she hid in his sister's hut, hoping that the rest of her in-laws would not find her.

But they hunted her down, she said, and insisted that if she refused to exorcise her dead husband's spirit; she would be blamed every time a villager died. So she put her two small children to bed and then forced herself to have sex with James's cousin.

'I cried, remembering my husband,' she said. 'When he was finished, I went outside and washed myself because I was very afraid. I was so worried I would contract AIDS and die and leave my children to suffer.'

James Mbewe had died in a truck accident, and his wife who remained behind was not only grieving for him, but she was scared to death (literally) of what was going to happen now that her husband had died. This is because

of the customs and beliefs, regarding widows which prevail in many parts of Africa even today. This practice which states that a widow needs to be 'cleansed' after her husband has died by sleeping with a relative, is widely practiced in many African countries such as Malawi, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and even Zambia (where one out of five a People Living With HIV and AIDS).

This practice is related to the Levirate marriage law which is both common to the Hebrew Bible and many African cultures, and which we will discuss below. There are also several other rituals and customs, which widows are meant to follow, both in African cultures and other cultures too, which dehumanise them and question their dignity. We do not have time to go into all of them here, so we will go through the one that is most related to HIV and AIDS and the Bible.



ACTIVITY 2



Write down the practices and rituals for widows in your community. Include a personal story that you might know where a widow had to do something similar to what was described above.

THE LEVIRATE MARRIAGE LAW

The laws for Levirate marriage are to be found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This law states that if brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, then the dead man's brother shall marry his brother's widow, so as to perpetuate the name of the dead brother in Israel. In the Book of Ruth, the first indication of the possibility of a Levirate marriage is found in the first chapter where Naomi urges her daughters-in-law whose husbands have died, to return to their mothers' houses.

Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their homes, because they cannot find happiness without men. She also laments that she is too old to have children, and even if she could, it would not do them any good because they would have to wait until they were adults in order to marry them. Naomi's lamentation has reference to Levirate marriage law. She assumes that her daughters-in-law understand what she is talking about when she says that she has no more sons for them.

The Levirate marriage law was indeed a practice in ancient times. Its purpose, besides providing male heirs to continue the name of the dead man, was also to take care of the widows who had no other form of economic survival. Remember this was at a time of patriarchy, (do you recall the meaning of this word? It means the 'rule of the father' or as it is loosely used these days 'male dominance'), when women very rarely worked outside of the home or provided for their own or their children's economic well-being. This is why the Levirate marriage law was needed.



ACTIVITY 3



Describe in your own words what the Levirate marriage law is and what it entails, both in contemporary culture and the Bible

STUDYING THE BOOK OF RUTH

a. Ruth Chapter 1: Ruth the Widow

Our first glimpse of Ruth is found in Ruth 1:4. Here she is spoken of only as the second Moabite woman whom Elimelech's son married: Her role here is

defined only in terms of her familial relationship to Elimelech's family, the wife of one of Elimelech's sons.



ACTIVITY 4



Read the story of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19:30-38. Then read Deuteronomy 23:2-4. Write down who a Moabite was and how they were considered in Israel

It is interesting to note that Elimelech's sons' names are Machlon and Chilion. Loosely translated their names mean 'weakening and pining' or 'blot out and perish.' It was as if their destinies were to die, even by their very names. We know them to be ill. Thus Ruth is named in relation to being the wife of Machlon.

The following glimpses of Ruth in the rest of the first chapter are of her as Naomi's daughter-in-law. She has already undergone a change from being defined in terms of her relationship to a man, to being defined in terms of her relationship to a woman, her mother-in-law. This is important to us because the story is now handed over to Ruth and Naomi, and in a way it shifts from being a man's story to being a woman's story.

Ruth, may also very well be aware of the fact that she will have to be the one who will provide for both Naomi and herself since Naomi cannot work because she is too old, nor can she remarry because she is also too old to bear children. In this regard, there is another change in terms of Ruth's character especially in respect to the word '*davak*' which is translated as 'cling' or 'cleave.' In Ruth 1:14, the narrator says that Orpah turned around and left, but Ruth 'clung' to her mother-in-law. Some scholars have asserted that the word '*davak*' in the Hebrew Bible is most often used in relation to God, but

when it is used in relation to humans, it nowhere else describes a woman's act. In Genesis 2:24 ("A man shall leave his mother and his father and cling (*davak*) to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."), 'clinging' refers to love and to marriage, and also possibly to sexual relations. The important point that to note is that *davak* refers to the male role in initiating marriage. Therefore, when Ruth clings to Naomi, Ruth takes the male role in initiating a relationship of formal commitment, similar to that in marriage. Therefore, Ruth has added on a male role of 'clinging' to Naomi as a husband and as a provider, as will be clear in chapter 2 of Ruth.

Please note that although there have been suggestions of a homosexual relationship between Naomi and Ruth, whether these arguments hold any merit, does not interest us here. Here our focus is on how Ruth has to take on what was considered to be a role reserved for men in that time – namely as provider or breadwinner.

How does this first chapter of Ruth relate to our contexts of HIV and AIDS?

The situation that Ruth, Orpah and Naomi found themselves in is all too familiar in our HIV and AIDS contexts. Even though our context is more than three thousand years later it seems very little has changed. There are many Ruth's, Orpah's and Naomi's who have lost their husbands' to HIV and AIDS. Their situation also has not changed. They too, like Naomi, want to change their names to 'Mara' which means 'bitter,' because like Naomi, they too have no rights to inherit property, no education to find work and earn money, and no children to help them in a time of need. Their situation seems dire. Let us move on to see if it gets any better.



ACTIVITY 5



Are there Naomi's, Ruth's and Orpah's in your community or family? Write down one of their stories

b. Ruth Chapter 2: Ruth the Breadwinner

In chapter 2, Ruth is presented as the breadwinner who goes out to glean in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. Gleaning was a means by which those who lived on the margins of society could survive. The laws for gleaning are listed in Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-22. As farmers reaped their crops, the workers were instructed to leave the corners of their fields un-harvested. Anything that fell to the ground was left for the poor, who would glean behind the reapers. This is what Ruth was going to do. She was going to the fields to glean. However, we see just how resourceful Ruth can be through her actions in the fields.

A number of commentators have suggested that when Ruth was in the fields she had not gleaned until Boaz had arrived, implying that she was waiting for his permission before she could start. However, the narrator informs us in v. 3, in what is a summary of Ruth's actions before Boaz arrives, '*vatalaket basade acharei hakotsrim,*' which is literally translated as 'she gleaned in the fields behind the reapers.' This, therefore, implies that she had already asked the permission of the foreman and had begun gleaning behind the reapers when Boaz arrived. When the foreman is speaking to Boaz in Ruth 2:5, he is reporting in indirect speech the conversation that took place between Ruth and him. He reports that she asked if she could gather among the sheaves. This was certainly an unusual request, since the laws in Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-22, allowed that people in need, could glean behind the

reapers, but not among them. The foreman could obviously not grant this request himself. However, Ruth could certainly glean behind the reapers since the law did not require permission for that. It seems therefore that Ruth had only been gleaning behind the reapers.



ACTIVITY 6



Write down in your own words why gleaning among the reapers as opposed to behind the reapers is so significant.

If Ruth planned only to glean behind the reapers then, as the law stated, she would not need permission. However, as Berquist (1993:280) has points out, “[G]leaning provided subsistence for those lowest in social status.” In Ruth’s case, with two persons eating an individual’s gleanings, even survival would be difficult. Ruth must find another solution to hunger and poverty.

It seems that in order to provide enough food for both Naomi and herself, Ruth had to request something beyond the scope of the law, namely, to glean among the reapers as opposed to simply behind them. In order to survive, Ruth had to undertake this daring act. (This act was daring because Ruth was a foreigner asking for a special favour). This daring and innovative act as presented in chapter 2 sets the scene for an even more daring act that she will perform in chapter 3.

In our contexts of HIV and AIDS, many women (because they have no financial independence) are also forced to go beyond the scope of the law to survive. They cannot simply survive on the ‘gleanings from behind.’ Sometimes this means that they or their children often get involved in crime, sometimes stealing money or food so that they do not go to bed hungry. Such

was the economic situation in the time of Ruth and such is the economic situation even in our own times. It seems little has changed.



ACTIVITY 7



Ruth's actions in chapter 2 are resourceful. I am sure that there are many stories of women or children who are forced either by legal or illegal means to take extraordinary measures in order to survive. Write their stories down.

c. Ruth Chapter 3: Ruth the Temptress/Seductress

In chapter 3, Naomi has developed a strategy which she hopes will help solve their problem. She asks Ruth to wash and perfume herself, put on her cloak, go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be, and after he has eaten and drunk, and laid down, she should uncover his feet and wait for his response. Naomi precedes this instruction with the statement that she wants to find a home for Ruth (Ruth 3:1) and that "Boaz is our relative" (Ruth 3:2). Naomi's interest is clearly to get Ruth married in order to ensure her own and, in the process, Ruth's survival. She finds Boaz to be a suitable partner, but there are two things working against this marriage. The first is that Boaz is a kinsman of Elimelech, not a brother of Machlon. Therefore, if the possibility existed for a Levirate marriage to be undertaken, it had to be undertaken between Naomi and Boaz. But Naomi was too old to have children, and since this was the point of a Levirate marriage, such a union would be fruitless. Therefore, Ruth would have to act in a way that makes the Levirate marriage work to ensure Naomi's survival.

The second problem follows from the first, in that if the marriage were to take place between Ruth and Boaz, consideration would have to be made for the

fact that Ruth was a foreigner. The Levirate marriage was applied to Israelites, but there was no mention of foreigners, and since there were laws forbidding the union of foreigners with Israelites, this law did not provide for the foreign widow.



ACTIVITY 8



Find out what the laws in your country concerning foreigners are, and write these laws down.

What is surprising is that Ruth agrees to Naomi's plan very readily and openly, without even so much as a dissuasion as was done in the first chapter, where Naomi tells her twice that she must return to her mother's home, and twice she says no. The fact that Ruth so readily agrees to the plan could mean that she recognised that the plan might have meant a permanent solution to their problems. Ruth's concern has not been to remarry. She gave up that idea in order to take care of Naomi as is demonstrated by her refusal to go back to Moab and find rest in the home of a husband (Ruth 1:6-18). Up until now, her main concern has been to provide food for Naomi and herself. She has not once indicated that she wants a husband. Now that the opportunity arises for her to have a husband, and in the process ensure the survival of both Naomi and herself, she takes it on.

Although Ruth is determined and says to Naomi that she will do all that she tells her, she does not do it. This is evident in Ruth 3:9 when Boaz asks Ruth, "Who are you?" and she answers, "I am Ruth your servant. Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin" (NRSV). Naomi told her to lie at Boaz's feet and wait for him to tell her what to do. Ruth, on the other hand does not wait. She takes charge of the situation by telling Boaz what she wants him to do. Also by a wordplay Ruth calls Boaz to act on God's behalf.

In the fields Boaz says to Ruth, “May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” (Ruth 2:12 NRSV). Ruth now uses the same word that Boaz has used earlier to indicate God’s protection (*kanaph*,’ which literally means ‘cloak’ or ‘wings’) when she tells him to spread his ‘cloak’ over her. In other words, Ruth challenges Boaz to act on behalf of the LORD God of Israel, to act on his religious commitments. It is highly likely that Boaz would be open to such an invitation since his character has been developed as that of a deeply religious man. His portrayal as a staunch religious Israelite is indicated in both his greetings with his workers and his dialogue with Ruth. Therefore, Ruth very cleverly re-appropriates Boaz’s religious language.

Ruth is thus undertaking an even more daring act than seduction when she calls on Boaz to spread his cloak over her, because she is a foreign woman calling on an Israelite man to accept a responsibility to which by law he does not have to answer. Ruth is driving the situation to ensure her own survival without her having to sacrifice her own dignity in the process, while simultaneously ensuring her rightful place in the Israelite community. Ruth is ensuring that she can progress from being an outsider to being an insider. But it is a daring and dangerous plan nonetheless.

ECONOMIC INJUSTICE, CULTURE AND HIV AND AIDS

When we think of our HIV and AIDS contexts today this is very dangerous. Ruth’s actions pose many problems in our HIV and AIDS contexts:

- ⌘ The fact that Ruth has to marry someone she barely knows or loves for that matter, for economical survival, is dangerous in and of itself. She

knows little of Boaz, other than that he is Naomi's relative. This is like the African woman from Malawi whom we quoted at the beginning of this unit who shares her experiences of having to sleep with her husband's relative to 'cleanses' herself and the community. In our context of HIV and AIDS this is obviously a very dangerous practice, especially because the sexual relationship does not occur within a context of mutual love and respect. It simply occurs as a cultural law, or in Ruth's case as an economic law.

- ⌘ Ruth is like many commercial sex workers in our context, who are forced through poverty and the need for survival for both them and their children to go out to the 'threshing floors' of rich, sometimes foreign men, in order to sell their bodies to ensure their survival. In some cases, all they do is sign their own death warrants, because they contract AIDS, and because of further entrenched poverty are unable to take care of themselves and eventually pass it onto others. The rich man who infected them on the other hand goes on living because he can afford access to drugs, good nutrition, and most of all overall well-being.

The situation in some parts of Africa still remains the same for widows as it was in Biblical times. This is because some African countries are still very patriarchal. What can be done so that women do not have to continue to sign their own death certificates and be forced to put themselves at risk in order to survive?

- ⌘ The first factor is to go to the heart of the problem which is economic injustice. I am a woman and I have a husband. If my husband had to die tomorrow, I will not find myself in the situation which Ruth and so many other widows in Africa find themselves in because I am economically independent. But how did that happen? It happened because I was able to gain access to an education, just like the males in my community and

family. However, there are still many families and communities who deny women the opportunities which are given to men to receive an education, hence they always have to be dependent. Some women, (like Naomi) in some cultures are still not allowed to inherit property. HIV and AIDS calls us to challenge and revise this situation.

- ⌘ The second factor is cultural practice. We have to begin to re-interpret cultural practices that bring with them more harm than good. Being forced to sleep with one's relative, should not be a requirement, even for the continuation of a family name, since the only way in which the family name can be continued is through male children. What happens if a woman only gives birth to daughters? These practices need to be recognised and exposed for what they are – a way to advance a male cause. It cannot continue in a context of HIV and AIDS.
- ⌘ The third factor to consider is how people become oppressed or more vulnerable due to race. Ruth was more vulnerable because she was a foreigner. She could not survive without an Israelite husband. She was oppressed 4 times over – not only was she a widow, but she was childless, she was a foreigner, and of course she was a woman. Again, these same factors seem to hinder women even today, and are thereby contributing to the rapid spread of HIV and AIDS.



ACTIVITY 9



In your own words summarise what you have learned from Ruth chapter three taking into account the issues of economic injustice, culture and race with regard to the situation of HIV and AIDS.



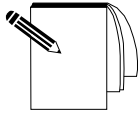
SUMMARY

Congratulations! You have now reached the end of unit 5. I hope that you have enjoyed reading the Book of Ruth. Although it seemed like an innocent tale it turned out to have many implications for the context of HIV and AIDS which many of us find ourselves in.

Let us briefly reflect on what we have covered in this unit:

We began with an overview of the Book of Ruth where we said that the main purpose of the Book of Ruth was to justify the Moabite ancestry of King David. Bearing male children therefore was central to the story. (Sorry I should have mentioned, although I gather that you know by now, having read the entire Book of Ruth in an earlier activity, that she does bear a son by the name of Obed, who eventually becomes not just the grandfather of David, but also finds himself in the line of Jesus!).

Following the overview, we described the Levirate marriage law, and then did a detailed literary analysis of the first three chapters in the Book of Ruth, trying to draw out the implications of each of the chapters to our context of HIV and AIDS. We said that because women make up the largest group of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) as a result of the inequalities in our societies, it was important for us to move beyond the Biblical model of patriarchy to one of empowerment for women.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. Describe in your own words Levirate marriage law.
Describe why Naomi is so bereft. Why does Naomi think that her situation is so bad that she wants to actually her name to Mara, meaning 'bitter'?
2. Explain how Ruth was resourceful as a breadwinner in chapter 2.
3. Describe Ruth's actions in chapter 3.
Why do you think such actions are dangerous in our context of HIV and AIDS?
4. Explain what you have learnt from these interpretations from the three chapters of Ruth.
5. Describe how this has enabled you to read the Bible more sensitively towards HIV and AIDS.
6. Give some practical suggestions as to how the status of widows can be changed in contemporary African society.
- 7.
- 8.



FURTHER READING

- Dube, Musa W., and Felicidade N. Chirenda. 2003. Widows and Widowhood. Pages 196-201 in *AfricaPraying: A Handbook of HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Nadar, Sarojini. 2000. Subverting Gender and Ethnic Assumptions in Biblical Narrative: Exploring the Narrative Voice of Ruth. *Journal for Constructive Theology*, 6/2, 67-84.
- Nadar, Sarojini. 2001. A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth. Pages 159-175 in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Atlanta/Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature: Atlanta/WCC Publications.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. 2003. Women's Service: Sermon Text Ruth 1-2. Pages 192-195 in *Africa Praying: A Handbook of HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications.



TEST FROM UNITS 1-5

INSTRUCTIONS

Congratulations on completing the first five units of this module. Please answer ALL the following questions as part of your course requirements. Your answers should be kept in a hardcover exercise book which you should keep safe for marking as evidence of having completed the first five units of this module.

a. Assignment No. 1

Write a letter to your church leader explaining:

1. How you think the Bible has been used negatively against People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA).
2. How the new methods which you have learnt in Unit 1 can help the church to read the Hebrew Bible in a way that is sensitive to HIV and AIDS contexts.
3. By way of a Biblical example, how the Book of Genesis can be read in a way that empowers people in HIV and AIDS contexts.

b. Test No. 1

Once you have completed the above assignment, close your books, and with the use of the Bible text alone complete the following test:

1. HIV and AIDS have been called a 'gendered epidemic.' Genesis chapter 1 and 2 have always been used to justify the oppression of women. Show, by using the new tools of hermeneutics that you have studied how these texts can be re-interpreted.

UNIT 6

STUDYING THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the sixth unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. By now, you should be getting familiar by with the method I have introduced to you of reading and interpreting Bible texts for liberation in a particular context. So far, we have already looked at two different books from two different literary families in the Hebrew Bible. We now continue with our studies by considering the Book of Esther, which also falls under the history books category.

In this unit we will begin by defining the situation of rape and establish the connections between HIV and rape. We will then do a literary analysis of Esther 2:1-18.

By this time, you may be wondering what rape has to do with the text of Esther. We will thus examine how, through the literary devices of plot and time, rape is concealed within the text of Esther.

Finally, we will close with an analysis of the implications of the naturalisation of rape for HIV and AIDS contexts.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Explain** the situation of rape in relation to HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ **Analyse** the way in which the literary device of the plot of the story of Esther functions
- ⌘ **Analyse** the first three chapters of the Book of Ruth using a literary hermeneutic
- ⌘ **Show** how the literary device of plot may conceal rape
- ⌘ **Analyse** the way in which the literary device of time functions in Esther
- ⌘ **Show** how the literary device of time may conceal rape
- ⌘ **Describe** ways in which rape has become acceptable in societies and in religious texts
- ⌘ **Show** how the acceptability of rape impacts on the spread of HIV and AIDS

TOPICS

- ⌘ Brief overview of the Book of Esther
- ⌘ Rape, culture and HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ Literary analysis of Esther 2:1-18
- ⌘ Rape and the Book of Esther: Resisting the plot of the story
- ⌘ Rape and the Book of Esther: Resisting the time markers in the story
- ⌘ The naturalisation of rape and its implications for HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER



ACTIVITY 1



In preparation for this unit, read the entire Book of Esther. Although the book consists of ten chapters, for the purposes of this unit we will only focus on chapter 2.

The Book of Esther is a bit easier to date than the Book of Ruth. This is because we know from Biblical history that the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem were carried into Exile by the Babylonians when the Temple was destroyed around 587 BCE. Babylon was eventually defeated and taken over by the Persian ruler Cyrus, who allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem. However, some did not return. We pick up the story of Esther and the Jews who did not return, under the reign of Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus) in about 486 BCE, although again the exact date is not certain. We do not know why the Jews did not return, although some scholars speculate that life in Jerusalem was even harder after the Jews returned.

The story of Esther is set in this context. Esther, and her cousin Mordecai who adopted her because she was an orphan, stayed on in Persia. It is also clear from Esther that the Jews may not have been liked in Persia. This is what drives the story in the book.

A certain man by the name of Haman decides to kill all the Jews in Persia, because he does not like one of them in particular, namely Esther's cousin, Mordecai. Esther is brought into the story, after the king throws out his first wife for apparent disobedience, and marries Esther. It seems like the point of the story is to see how Esther is able to help save the Jews from destruction.

Is this all there is to the story? What does the story mean for us in our contexts of HIV and AIDS? I would say that there is more to the story than simply heroism. This story is also about abuse of power and rape. I will demonstrate this in a little while, but first let me very briefly state some facts about rape, which we will return to at the end.



ACTIVITY 2



In your own words, write down the main points of the story of the Book of Esther. Pretend you are telling the story to a child. Begin with the words, "Once upon a time there lived a king..."

RAPE, CULTURE AND HIV AND AIDS

Given that we will examine the situation of rape, it is important to define at the outset what we mean by rape.

The word rape is derived from the Latin word '*rapere*' which means 'to seize.' The focus in English is 'to seize another person' and force that person to have sexual intercourse. The rape statistics are different for every country but it is safe to say that it 'one rape is too many' in all countries of the world, not just in Africa.

The problem with rape is that most times we do not have accurate statistics, because not everyone who has been raped reports the rape. In fact, some statistics say that more than half of all cases of rape are never officially reported to the police authorities. Besides this fact, there is also another factor. The legal definitions of rape often differ from the cultural definitions of rape. I am going to say this again – the legal definitions of rape, often differ from the

cultural definitions of rape. In other words, there are many cultures, and even some religions, that covertly or unconsciously promote and condone rape.

Now, this seems to be a radical thing to say, but it is true.

Let us take for example, the king of Swaziland. A few years back, he made the press headlines for 'abducting' twin girls under the age of 18 years. The law states that sexual acts with anyone under the age of 18 years is unlawful and can be considered statutory rape, even if the girl has consented. However, that's not what the culture says. Hence, the culture and the law are at odds with each other, and because the legal system is so slow and so lax about prosecuting such offenders, many offenders often get away with it. In the king's case not only does he have culture supporting him, but he has power too. He is, after-all, the Swazi king. It is also well known that the king has many wives. What happens then if he is HIV positive?

The above is just one example of the link between rape, culture and HIV. We will explore now how rape is made to seem like something natural in the Bible. In order to overcome this interpretation, we will read the text with liberation and a womanist hermeneutic. By so-doing we will not perpetuate the mistaken belief that rape is 'natural.'



ACTIVITY 3



Write down examples from your own context where there might be practices of 'institutionalised' rape, such as the case of the Swazi king.

LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ESTHER 2:1-18

Chapter 2 of the Book of Esther opens with Queen Vashti having been deposed for not appearing when the king summoned her to show off her beauty to all his male friends who were “merry with wine” (Esther 1:10 NRSV). Chapter 2 documents the search for one “instead of Vashti” (Esther 2:4 NRSV). Hence, Esther 2:1-18 seems – at least on the surface – to be concerned with a beauty contest. Virgins are gathered in the king’s harem, from which he is going to choose a new wife. It certainly does seem innocent enough. What we are not told is what happens to the bodies of all the virgin women who we are told go into the king’s palace at night and return in the morning, and do not return to the palace again until the king decides that they have pleased him, and wants to see them again. If we read the text carefully we will see that the king is spending a night with each of the virgins. They are not simply paraded before him in beautiful gowns. Yet, what happens to these virgins when they go in to the king’s room at night? Their bodies are violated and raped, being treated as mere objects of sexual desire.



ACTIVITY 4



There are many stories in the Hebrew Bible which deal with rape or potential rape, such as Judges 19. In your own words, write down two such stories.

Although Vashti is immediately deposed, the king takes a long time to decide who his new bride is going to be. His power as king allows him to sanction a nationwide search for a new bride. The reader expects that this greater choice will allow the king to choose much more carefully than he did previously. This time he should not end up with another wife like Vashti who disobeyed and humiliated him so publicly. His careful choice of a new bride should help

in solving the complication his first wife's disobedience. For this, the reader expects that the king would have carefully chosen criteria for the potential candidates for the position of queen. However, the only criteria it seems that they had to fulfil was that they had to look beautiful (hence the twelve months of cosmetic treatment that the young virgins had to undergo at the house of Hegai the Eunuch) and be good in bed (after spending a night with all the girls, the king would only call back a girl that "pleased" (Esther 2:14 NRSV) him. Eventually, the king finds one who fulfils these criteria, in the person of Esther, and with her introduction as the king's new wife a state of equilibrium (that is balance or peace) is once more reached in the palace.

a. Rape and the Book of Esther: Resisting the Plot of the Story

When I speak about the plot of a story I mean the way in which the story is set out. That is, the beginning, the middle and the end. Plots are usually structured along a pattern of 'equilibrium - complication - equilibrium.' Simply put this means 'all is well - problem - all is well again.' Vashti's 'disobedience' introduces a state of complication, but Esther's ascension to the throne, re-introduces equilibrium. This is the way in which this plot seems to work - through establishing and re-establishing the power of the male over the female.

In order to read the Book of Esther for liberation in our HIV and AIDS contexts we need however to resist the way in which the Book of Esther is plotted. In other words, I am asking you to adopt a strategy for reading.

Within this story there are three ways in which we can understand the way in which the plot works:

- ⌘ Story plots contain inherent devices or mechanisms which guide the reader from one event to the next until a 'satisfactory' ending is reached. All readers have to follow this path or route that is set up through this device in order to reach true meaning of the text. This is how, I think, most churches have read the Bible. We read it as perhaps we are told to read it. We follow all the unmarked clues in the text until we reach the end. Hence, if we follow the first line of thinking with regard to the way in which the plot functions then we have to simply say that rape of all the women in the harem was simply what needed to happen in order for the Jews to be saved. In other words, it is simply a part of the plot development and we should not dwell on it too much.
- ⌘ The second element of the way in which a plot works, might tell us something different. This factor suggests that even though the narrative seems to chart out a plot that seeks to direct us in a certain way, the text actually contains elements, which if followed, carefully might lead us in a different direction. If we follow the second line of thinking, which says that the text itself contains elements which might give us clues in another direction or way of thinking then we will have to look for those clues in the text. There does not seem to be any in this text. It seems to simply endorse the rape of all these women.
- ⌘ The third and final element is the readers' understanding of the plot. In other words, it is the reader who decides how to follow a plot. If we employ this third line of thinking, in my case I read as a womanist. My first instinct is to resist the idea that the rape of all these women and of Esther as well is justified simply because the plot needs to be advanced and the Jews need to be saved. When I read the narrative through womanist lenses, Esther's ascension to the throne, may be interpreted as her buying into the patriarchal game, which in this case is a dangerous game of rape. At the same time, as a womanist I understand how

vulnerable she was, as an orphan, as an exile, as a poor person, and as a woman. Like Ruth, Esther too must have been desperate with little choice.

From this it seems that if we employ a particular mode of reading we will be able to see things in the text that seem to 'naturalise' rape, that makes it out as something that needs to happen in order for the 'bigger plan' to be fulfilled.



ACTIVITY 5



Are there situations in your community or culture where rape has been normalised/ accepted/ naturalised? In other words, even though the problem was serious, because the rapist may have been a member of high standing in the community (for example, the headman or priest) it was taken to be 'not that bad.' Write down these stories.

b. Rape and the Book of Esther: Resisting the Time Markers in the Story

Analysing the use of time in this narrative will also show why this text is a text that condones rape.

The Book of Esther opens with a phrase that sets the story in a concrete historical moment in time, namely, the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus (Xerxes I).

The text continues:

In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his ministers and ministers (Esther 1:3 NRSV).

We are told that it is in this period of banqueting (that is, in the third year of his reign) that Vashti is thrown out. The time marker: “after these things...” (Esther 2:1 NRSV) which begins the search for a new bride, indicates that little time has passed between the deposal (the ‘throwing out’) of Vashti and the nationwide pursuit for a new queen. The next time marker is found within Esther 2:16-17:

When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favour and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti (Esther 2:16-17 NRSV).

It is clear from this text that four years have now passed since the king began his search for a new queen and before Esther ‘wins his favour.’ One of these years was spent preparing the virgins with cosmetic treatments. After their cosmetic makeovers the time came for each girl to enter the king’s palace. Another time marker indicates the amount of time that the girl spent with the king:

In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaasgaz, the king’s eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines (Esther 2:14 NRSV).

This process goes on for three years before Esther is chosen as queen. The time markers contained in these chapters suggest at least two things:

- ⌘ The king takes four years to choose a new queen;

⌘ Apart from the one year that the women spent receiving cosmetic treatments, he had sexual intercourse with each of the virgins – indicated by the fact that each of them went into the palace from the virgin’s harem, spent a night with the king, and then returned not to the harem of the virgins, but to the harem of the concubines. This means that their status has been changed from virgins to concubines, which means that there was definitely sexual activity in the king’s palace that night.

These time markers hold great significance with respect to the king’s character as an all-powerful monarch, who’s every need, including sexual, had to be taken care of, irrespective of the women he violated in the process. The long period of time that the king takes to choose his new bride reflects his power. Even though the narrative is comprised of short sentences to pick up the pace of the narrative, this device seems to suggest that the text does not want to dwell much on this issue. It is a womanist reading that picks up on such issues as the abuse of power which is simply ‘brushed off’ in the context of short sentences, thus highlighting how Biblical narrators conspire in the rape of women. Undoubtedly, we too as interpreters of the Bible also appear to conspire in this ‘cover up’ by ‘brushing off’ the rape of the virgins in order to reach the conclusion of the plot, which is to save the Jews. We, who usually rely on the Bible as word of God, need to take careful notice of these reference points within the Biblical text so that the horror of rape is not continued.

The verses which describe the king’s ‘liaisons’ with the women definitely indicate that rape happened (albeit through short sentences). At the same time, it tries to focus the reader’s mind away from it by focusing the reader’s attention on the ‘glorious’ occasion of Esther being chosen as queen.



ACTIVITY 6



In your own words, write down how reading the story in the above way has changed the way in which you view the Book of Esther in our context of HIV and AIDS.

THE NATURALISATION/ACCEPTANCE OF RAPE IN RELIGION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR HIV AND AIDS

Rape is prevalent in so many societies that it is difficult to talk about all of the societies in which this crime occurs. Hence, I am going to use my own country – South Africa – as an example.



QUOTATION

South Africa has the highest rape statistics in the world for a country that is not at war. It is estimated that 1 in 2 women will be raped in her lifetime in South Africa.

Source: Lloyd Vogelmann, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

South Africa also has one of the highest rates of HIV infection rates in the world, with 1, 500 new infections being reported every day.

It is not clear how many of these HIV statistics have their roots in rape, but my guess is that a large number of them do. You see, this is because rape is not always committed by person's unknown, i.e., a stranger. Rather, the statistics in South Africa reveal that rape is almost always committed by a

person that is known to the survivor. Rape committed by someone known to the survivor accounts for almost three quarters of all rape statistics.

What does this mean?

It means that our societies are so ingrained with the idea that rape is acceptable that men feel that they can rape women that they know, their girlfriends, their family, their sisters, their wives, and even in some cases little babies (as was the case with nine-month old Baby Tshepang, a well documented story in South Africa), because they believe that sleeping with a young virgin will cure them of AIDS.


What makes rapists so brave that they feel that they are able to do these things and get away with it?

It is the way in which our society is structured. Men are trained to be dominant while women have to be submissive. Men have more power and women have less. The story of Esther is very clear on this. The rape of all those women, was accepted both as part of the culture (perhaps a royal culture) and because the male was extremely powerful, afterall, he was the king! When we read texts like these in our churches, and if we do not read them with a womanist or a feminist hermeneutic in mind, we also endorse this behaviour. We do not seem to mind that women are a means to an end.

Our HIV and AIDS contexts call us to break this silence. Our HIV and AIDS contexts should call us to call rape 'rape' and not love. To call rape 'rape' and not hide behind cultural practices, whether Biblical or local.

Because the Bible plays such an important part in the lives of people of faith, if we are seen to endorse this behaviour in the Bible, then it becomes

acceptable to us in our societies. But HIV and AIDS calls us to break the silence. To say NO. To say that we will not accept this situation when it can cause the deaths of thousands of women. As Karen Buckenham writes:



QUOTATION

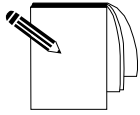
To prevent rape, we need to challenge societal beliefs and cultural values that promote and condone sexual violence. The silence surrounding rape by society at large, including the church, denotes its acceptance, and allows it to continue.



SUMMARY

Hearty congratulations! You have now reached the end of unit 6. I trust that this unit has continued to challenge and inform your way of thinking.

The aim of this unit was to again familiarise you with the method of literary hermeneutics. Through an analysis of the way in which the devices of plot and time operate in the story of Esther, I have sought to show you how certain acts such as rape can be taken to be something natural, or something acceptable in the light of the 'bigger picture.' But, we also said that the end does not justify the means! It cannot justify the means when as we saw there is a clear link between HIV and rape, and that making an act like rape seem acceptable will simply allow it to continue and to increase as a crime thereby increasing the rates of HIV in our communities. We have to point out that rape was not acceptable in the Biblical culture and it is certainly not acceptable in our own. HIV and AIDS calls us to make this statement loud and clear.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. Write down a brief summary of the story of Esther.
2. Define rape.
3. By using an example, show how rape can be defined differently culturally and legally.
4. Show how this distinction impacts the spread of HIV.
5. Identify the three ways in which a plot works in a text.
6. In your opinion, which of the three ways is most appropriate to read Esther chapter 2?
7. Identify the time markers in Esther chapter 2. Show how the time markers serve to 'naturalise' rape.
8. State why you think that the church is also responsible for the high rape statistics.
9. State in what ways the church can help in curbing the increase of rape and HIV statistics.



FURTHER READING

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Maluleke, Tinyiko Sam, and Sarojini Nadar. 2002. Special Issue: Overcoming Violence Against Women and Children. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (November).

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UNIT 7

STUDYING THE BOOK OF JOB PART 1: WOMEN AND THE POOR IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the seventh unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. I trust that you are now familiar with Biblical methods of interpretation, and in particular, interpretation of Biblical texts in the light of our HIV and AIDS contexts.

Job is part of the wisdom books. Remember we said in unit 3, that with the exception of Psalms, wisdom books are those books that tend to give advice on how to live and they try to make sense of the problems and suffering which people undergo. Because the questions of suffering, stigma and discrimination are such a big part of the HIV and AIDS story; and because Job provides one of the most detailed examinations of the problem of suffering, I thought that we would not do justice to this book in one unit only. So I have decided that we will continue with our study of the Book of Job in unit 8.

As I have said, from all the Bible texts we have studied so far, the text of Job is the one that perhaps gives us the strongest message against the association of illness with individual sin and punishment. In deed, the Book of Job shows very clearly that suffering is a complicated matter and is not simply related to issues of reward and punishment. In these units (that is, both 7 and 8), we will

seek to understand how such an interpretation of the Book of Job can help us in the struggle against HIV and AIDS. In this unit we will do this in two ways:

- ⌘ We will show why it is important to re-read the text of Job in the light of HIV and AIDS from an African woman's perspective;
- ⌘ We will examine how the poor can find identification with the text of Job.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Provide** an overview of the Book of Job
- ⌘ **Describe** the suffering caused through HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ **Analyse** the suffering caused through HIV and AIDS stigma and discrimination
- ⌘ **Describe** why women can identify with the text of Job
- ⌘ **Explain** why the poor can identify with the text of Job

TOPICS

- ⌘ Brief overview of the Book of Job
- ⌘ Suffering, stigma and discrimination in HIV and AIDS contexts
- ⌘ AIDS as a punishment from God
- ⌘ Reading Job from the perspective of the poor
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF JOB



ACTIVITY 1



Read the entire Book of Job in preparation for this unit. Once completed, write down the main points of the story.

We do not know who the author of the Book of Job was. The book does not name an author. Most scholars believe that the Book of Job is the result of a long process of writing. They are of the opinion that the book is divided into prose and poetry sections and that the poetry is framed by the prose sections. The poetry sections (Job 3-31) form the foundations of the book, while the prose was written later as a frame. In other words, if we were to think about a picture frame, Job 3-31 would be the actual picture, while the Job chapter 1 and 2 and 32-42 would be the frame. When one looks at a picture frame it is the picture that is most important, not the frame. Of course, scholars disagree on the details of these things (as they always do!) but what is important for us to know is that the book is divided into prose and poetry sections.

It is also important for us to know that Job is definitely set in a patriarchal period. The fact that Job's wealth is measured in terms of the number of cattle he owned, and the number of servants he employed, and all his other possessions, points to the fact that he measured up in terms of what was required of a great patriarch. He also was the head of a large family. These are the important things we need to know about the Book of Job.

We will not concern ourselves with the details of which parts were written first and which parts were written later. Remember we said at the beginning of this module that when people read for liberation they are not concerned

with whom the author was or when the text was written. When they read the Biblical text they are concerned with how the Biblical text can speak to them in their time of need. Thus, in our examination of the Book of Job which follows, this is exactly what we are going to do.



ACTIVITY 2



1. *Who was Job?*
2. *What happened to Job?*
3. *How did Job's wife react to his suffering?*
4. *What did each of Job's friends say about his suffering?*
5. *What did God say about Job's suffering?*

SUFFERING, STIGMA, AND DISCRIMINATION IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

'Thembi' (age 26) died silently in a backroom of one of Johannesburg's suburbs at the age of 29. Her health began to deteriorate; she grew thin, lost her appetite and then became too weak to get out of bed. "I asked my mother to come from the Transkei to nurse me because my boyfriend had gone back to Maputo. I cannot tell my mother that I have the 'new sickness.' She thought I had been toored (bewitched) and sent for the sangoma to rub me with herbs to chase the demons out. Nothing helps. Now I am afraid that Sisi is also sick. What will happen to her? I can't tell my church. They will judge me." Thembi died two weeks later. Her boyfriend arrived in time to bury her. Her

daughter Sisi now lives with her grandmother and she is showing signs of being infected with HIV.

The story told above of Thembi, captures the story of thousands of others like Thembi, who are HIV positive and others who are dying of AIDS who cannot get help and adequate care because they are too afraid to disclose their status due to the stigma and discrimination which comes with being HIV positive. The tragic story of Gugu Dlamini who was beaten and stoned by neighbours in her township near Durban, South Africa, after disclosing her HIV status is an indication of the results of stigma. The result of stigma is discrimination, and this discrimination led to the death of Gugu.

Why then are people so afraid of HIV and AIDS that they discriminate against or stigmatise those with HIV. According to the Avert website, an international AIDS charity, factors which contribute to HIV and AIDS related stigma include:

- ⌘ HIV and AIDS is a life-threatening disease;
- ⌘ People are scared of contracting HIV;
- ⌘ The disease's association with behaviours (such as sex between men and injection drug-use) that are already stigmatised in many societies;
- ⌘ People living with HIV and AIDS are often thought of as being responsible for becoming infected;
- ⌘ Religious or moral beliefs that lead some people to believe that having HIV and AIDS is the result of moral fault (such as promiscuity or so-called 'deviant sex') that deserves to be punished.

Of the reasons provided above for stigma and discrimination, we will focus on the last reason provided, namely 'religious or moral beliefs.' This has been the cornerstone, I think, of many peoples' beliefs that have resulted in stigma

and discrimination. We want to examine, in these two units, how, discrimination and stigma can be handled, and further how the problem of suffering can be explained.



ACTIVITY 3



Do you know of people in your community who have been stigmatised or discriminated against because of a particular illness, even if that illness was not HIV and AIDS? If so, write down one such story and write down the reasons why you think they have been discriminated against.

AIDS AS A PUNISHMENT FROM GOD

There seems to be two sides concerning the ways in which Christian people have responded to HIV and AIDS. In simple terms, there are those who believe that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God and those who do not. Each group acts according to its belief. For example, Nancy Carter recently quoted in one of her sermons a statistic that only 8% of North Americans would be willing to contribute toward AIDS relief work in Africa. 70% of the same group said that they were willing or that they had contributed to funds raised to help victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, where more than 3000 people died.

What is the difference between these two causes?

The first and most obvious is that the September 11 attacks occurred in North America, and HIV and AIDS, as considered by most people in the West, seems to be 'Africa's baby.' I suspect however, that the reason for the refusal of help goes beyond patriotism, since in her sermon, Carter goes on to talk

about her North American friend Debbie, who died of AIDS, and her parents who refused any person living with AIDS to attend the funeral, so that Carter had to hold a separate memorial service. Undoubtedly the reason for the parents' behaviour and for those North Americans, who said that they would not contribute funds for HIV and AIDS causes, is that they have subscribed to the most commonly circulated assumption that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God for immorality. Hence, people who are victims of this deadly disease supposedly deserve the punishment.

This view of the issue is present in Africa as well. We see it, most clearly, in a recent issue of a theological journal in South Africa:


In most cases AIDS is the result of denying God and disobeying His commandments. It is the outcome of apostasy. It is not primarily a health problem, but a heart problem. For the human heart which frees itself from God also casts off all restraints. It seeks to gratify the self and enter into sin.

There are numerous other studies that also show similar findings from churches when posed with the question of how to deal with HIV and AIDS. It seems that at the heart of the church debate concerning HIV and AIDS, the world over, is the argument that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God.

This viewpoint, however, is not restricted to our own century or culture of thought. It can be traced back to Ancient Near Eastern and oriental traditions. Indeed, scholars have shown that in oriental thought there is a clear connection between a person's actions and his or her own well-being. In other words, an obedient, God-fearing person prospers, while the godless and those who do not obey are punished.

Biblical traditions are no different. J. D. Crossan has shown how in Deuteronomy 28 a similar understanding can be found. There are blessings pronounced for those who are 'good' and curses for those who are 'wicked.' However, as Crossan points out, the Israelites, whom the chapter is addressing, were in a 'no-win' situation, because they were living in an area that was in a permanent situation of drought and war. This was through no fault of their own yet according to this theology these people would have to think that they are permanent sinners because they were always being 'punished.' It is clear that they were not being 'punished,' for anything but they were in a particular political and agricultural setting that caused their situation.

A parallel can be drawn between the Israelites' story and our story in our contexts of HIV and AIDS in Africa. In other words, the related question that we should be asking is how HIV and AIDS can be a punishment from God when as Nyambura Njoroge notes:



QUOTATION

Africa has been the most affected continent because it was already vulnerable as a result of abject poverty. The HIV and AIDS virus came to a people already knocked down by an unending spiral of poverty, disease and violence.

Asking this question means facing up to the challenge that we as students of the Bible face. It is the challenge that urges us to find alternative and other voices in the Bible: voices that are different to what Walter Brueggemann (1992:22) calls the 'common theology'. This theology is one that affirms the 'legitimated order' of deed and consequence. That is that what you sow you shall reap. This theology is not enough, because in the context of HIV and

AIDS which we live in, those who live with HIV and AIDS have not always sown badly. So, there must be another voice.

Walter Brueggemann (1992:25) provides us with an alternative voice that can give us hope. He names this other theology the 'embrace of pain' theology. This is a theology that is borne out of the concrete painful experiences of people. As we begin our study on the Book of Job, let us try and see if we can find this second voice, this voice of hope, this 'embrace of pain' theology rather than the 'common theology.'



ACTIVITY 4



*Has your Pastor ever preached on HIV and AIDS? What were the messages that you used to receive concerning the disease?
What are the messages which you receive now? Are they different*

READING JOB AS A WOMAN

In order to find a message of hope, in this text we have to find out first whether People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) can actually identify with the text. Hence, in this section we shall examine to what extent women (particularly women in Africa) can identify with the Book of Job.

We have shown over and over again throughout this module that women make up the largest group of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA), and are the most vulnerable to the disease. I am sure you will agree that it is very important to find a positive message in the midst of HIV and AIDS which takes into account whether women can identify with the text to be used for such a reading in the first place.

From a brief glance at the Book of Job one is tempted to say No! The book seems to be about, and for, males. All the conversations and the important theological debate seem to take place between men. Job's wife, the only woman who is given a voice, has never received positive interpretations in traditional readings of the book.



ACTIVITY 5



Write down the perceptions you have had of Job's wife.

I am sure you will agree that Job's wife has been portrayed in a less than positive light! (See, Job 2:10). In fact, her characterisations have ranged from being a 'foolish woman' to a 'nagging wife,' and even an 'agent of Satan.' If we are able to free ourselves from the shackles of past interpretations, which might seem to colour our picture of Job's wife, I think that we could come up with an alternative interpretation of her. What do you think?

I would suggest that Job's wife is the key to the way in which we can read the Book of Job, as her intervention (some have called it interference!) is that which provides the 'glue' which holds the structure of the book together.

Given that it is almost a general consensus that the Book of Job is divided into prose and poetry, it is interesting that Job's wife appears in the prose section, not in the poetry. The prose section we are told is only a frame to the story. In other words the 'real' story takes place from Job chapters 3 to 31. The impression that we get, therefore, is that the real theological discussions and reflections only take place in the poetry section. Hence, Job's wife is considered as outside of the main story. (Remember the example of the picture frame that we used earlier to describe the difference between the

poetry and the prose sections?). If, however, you have read the story carefully you would have noticed that Job's wife is a key player to the way in which the narrative is worked out, because it is her words that most meaningfully capture the theological discussions of the poetry, which centre around the very issue that Job's wife raises – namely – blessing and cursing, rewards and punishment.

Job's wife is introduced to us in the prologue with the statement:

Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die (Job 2:9 NRSV).

The word translated 'curse' is the Hebrew word '*barak*.' It is an ambiguous word (that means, it can have two meanings) in the text, since it is taken to mean both 'bless' and 'curse'. Whatever we may take her statement to mean, that is, whether we take it to mean 'bless' or 'curse' (Job has obviously taken it to mean curse judging by his response), the fact is, Job's wife sets the tone for the engaging debate with Job's friends which follows. Through the double-meaning of the word '*barak*' Job's wife raises the issue of what causes suffering. Is it when we bless God? Is it when we curse God? Is it when we do good? Is it when we do evil?

We will soon discover that this is exactly the topic of discussion in the main section of the narrative, in the so-called 'important' part of the narrative.

People have often preached against Job's wife. They have stated that she abandons Job in his time of greatest need. Job's response seems to indicate that she does not understand the way in which we should respond to God in times of suffering:

But he [Job] said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad? In all this Job did not sin with his lips (Job 2:10 NRSV).

Yet, the next words we hear from Job after the encounter with his wife are those of his wife! Newsom (1992:140) notes: "Though he does not curse God, he curses the day of his birth. Though he does not die, he speaks longingly of death....his wife's troubling questions have become his own." What we can conclude, therefore, is that Job's wife has a much greater theological understanding than Job and his friends.

By accepting that women are able to also think theologically about the issue of suffering, (even though her thoughts seem to be put outside the 'main action' of the story) women have an in-road into this text that would otherwise seem to be for and about male suffering only. The question whether women are touched by Job's suffering, as women, can be partially answered through such an interpretation of the character of Job's wife as provided above.

In the context of HIV and AIDS where women are the primary caregivers of those infected by the disease, surely women too need to ask such questions of God. Women too need to ask questions about suffering instead of pretending that we know the answers when in fact we do not. It is in the questioning itself that some healing can begin. It is found in admitting that we do not have all the answers, but that we will try to do the best in the circumstances that we are given, that healing can begin. It is in allowing ourselves to go through the processes of being angry, resentful, hurt, that healing can begin.



ACTIVITY 6



Have your perceptions about Job's wife changed from what you wrote down in Activity 5. If so, please write down how they have changed.

READING JOB FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE POOR

As we said, Job is undoubtedly a patriarchal male – a very rich patriarchal male. Although HIV and AIDS are not discriminating, in that both the rich and the poor have been infected, it is the poor that suffer most from this deadly disease. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa has been criticised for not granting pregnant women with HIV and AIDS and survivors of rape access to post-exposure prophylaxis (PEPs). In fact, Mbeki and the South African government were taken to the Constitutional Court by AIDS activists because of his refusal. Some government leaders' arguments are that there is a host of other factors which are related to AIDS which cannot be solved through access to drugs alone.

Mbeki's refusal of drugs to already vulnerable people is inexcusable, but he is also making a bigger argument. He draws our attention to a very important issue concerning the disease, that it has a direct relationship with wider economic, gender and political contexts. The argument that AIDS did not come to the 'Jobs' of Africa would seem justified, since those most infected are the poorest of the poor. In the same way that we asked whether women can identify with this text, we have to ask whether the poor can identify with such a text. After all, it seems that Job's tragedy is felt most because he was a respected wealthy member of society. How often do we hear the cliché: 'S/he had so much going for him/her.' What about those who are most severely hit

by the disease who have 'nothing going for them?' It seems that such persons might experience difficulty in identifying with the plight of Job.

To say this however is to miss the point. Job actually lost all his material wealth and support structures before he was struck with this terrible illness. In fact, Job's questioning of God only begins after he is struck with extreme physical illness. His response when his material wealth is stripped away from him is very simplistic:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD (Job 1:21 NRSV).

Job's physical suffering is what prompts his very strong questioning of God's justice. The questioning of God's justice thus becomes central to the rest of the chapters in which Job engages in a deep theological debate with his friends and with God concerning this very issue - how can God be just when God allows poor people to suffer? It is only because Job's suffering is experienced as a poor person that he is able to articulate the kinds of arguments that he does.

In chapter 24 Job laments the fact that those who cause the suffering of people, and those who oppress and exploit, remain unpunished. He sees the injustice of it all from the perspective of the poor, not as a rich farmer. He is only able to do this because he himself has become poor; he himself has experienced the pain and suffering that the poor undergo.



ACTIVITY 7



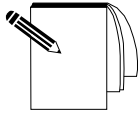
Summarise in your own words how you think the poor are able to identify with the Book of Job.



SUMMARY

Although we have not finished our study of the Book of Job, it is important to pause here for just a moment to summarise what we have been saying so far.

We began by sketching the situation of suffering, stigma and discrimination that those who live with HIV and AIDS experience. We then went on to trace the roots of people's understanding that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God. Finally, we carried out an analysis of the Book of Job, beginning first with the question of whether women and the poor (the two groups who are most affected by HIV and AIDS) can even identify with the Book of Job. Having shown that they can, we will move on to do an analysis of the rest of the book in Unit 8. Take time now to also do the self-assessment activity for this unit.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. Write down the main points of the Book of Job.
Describe the situation of suffering, stigma and discrimination of those living with HIV and AIDS in your context.
2. 'HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God.' Argue either for or against this statement.
3. Analyse how women can identify with the text of Job.
4. Describe how the poor can identify with the text of Job.



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UNIT 8

STUDYING THE BOOK OF JOB PART 2: SUFFERING, STIGMA, AND DISCRIMINATION IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the eighth unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. In this unit, we will continue to examine how the Book of Job shows that suffering is a complicated matter, not simply related to issues of reward and punishment.

Now that we have established, in unit 7, that there are points at which PLWHA and the affected can identify the text of Job, we can turn our attention to the actual debates between Job, his friends, and God, in our search for the alternative voice within the text, one that can bring hope in our context of HIV and AIDS. Unfortunately, we do not have the time or space to dwell on the individual speeches made by each character. I want therefore to suggest that we do this in another way. I want us to follow Carol Newsom's (1992:141) way of focusing on Job's friends' sources of authority for their arguments. From there, we will focus on Job's responses to Job and his friends, and finally God's response to them all.

As in unit 7, we will finally seek to appreciate how suffering is understood in the Book of Job and how this knowledge can help us in the struggle against HIV and AIDS. We will do this in two particular ways:

- ⌘ We will explore the debates surrounding illness and death found within the text by focusing on the speeches made by Job's friends with regard to the cause and the purpose of his suffering. Here we will try to do a parallel reading between their arguments and those made by contemporary theologians, concerning the issue of suffering;
- ⌘ We will focus on the response from God towards the debates between Job and his friends, and show how this response can lead us to a new interpretation concerning the issue of suffering and HIV and AIDS in our communities.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Explain** the views concerning illness and death in ancient and Biblical times
- ⌘ **Analyse** through a parallel examination the debates surrounding illness and death in the context of the text and in our own context
- ⌘ **Analyse** the sources of authority which each of Job's friends use to condemn him in his time of suffering
- ⌘ **Evaluate** the responses of God to the problem of suffering posed in the Book of Job

TOPICS

- ⌘ Sources of authority for judgment against those who suffer
- ⌘ Common sense

- ⌘ Observation
- ⌘ Theology
- ⌘ God's response to suffering
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further reading

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY FOR JUDGMENT AGAINST THOSE WHO SUFFER

Have you ever found that people who say they are trying to help you can actually bring you down more than they help you? Job's friends were those kinds of people.

We are told in Job 2:11 that Job's friends came to him to "console and comfort with him" (NRSV). By the end of the book it is very clear, both through the words of God and in our own reading of the text, that they have done everything, but that!

Remember what we said at the beginning of the module, that the wisdom books are about ordering lives, giving advice and generally understanding why things are the way they are. Often, the idea was that things are the way they are because of previously decided principles or beliefs. One of those wisdom principles went something like this: 'Good people live well, bad people suffer,' or, in other words, 'the righteous prosper and the wicked perish.' These seem good enough beliefs, don't they?

In regard to this, the Book of Job poses a problem to this traditional principle. It tells us that Job was a righteous man. Now surely this flies in the face of this principle? How can a righteous man suffer? How can God allow a righteous

man to suffer when the principle is that the righteous prosper, live well, and it is wicked people who are supposed to suffer and perish?

Job's friends knew this principle very well when they come to visit him. When they saw him, they were shocked! They could not understand why such a wealthy and prosperous man like Job should suffer, hence they figure according to traditional wisdom principles that he must have sinned. He must have done something wrong! After-all no-one suffers for nothing!

After sitting with him for seven days, watching him suffer so much, hearing him even curse the day he was born, his friends still find it appropriate to convince Job that his suffering must be his own fault. Hence, all the so-called main parts of the book, the poetic sections, are spent on Job's friends' attempts to convince Job of this point; that he must have sinned. Unfortunately, we do not have the time or space to examine this point in detail. Instead, what we are going to do is employ the method that Carol Newsom employed when she examined the speeches made by Job's friends. She identified the sources of authority upon which these friends based their arguments. In other words, she wanted to get to the roots of their beliefs. So, let us begin to find those roots.



ACTIVITY 1



1. *Do you know of people who are judgmental of those living with HIV and AIDS?*
2. *Discuss the basis of their judgement. In other words, what is at the root of their beliefs?*

a. Common Sense

Newsom identifies the first source of authority as common sense. As Eliphaz says to Job:

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? (Job 4:7 NRSV).

This sort of 'common sense argument' should make sense in an ideal world, but it did not make sense to Job in his world and it certainly does not make sense in our own continent ravaged, not just by HIV and AIDS, but also by the devastating effects of colonialism, apartheid, genocide, and the most recent of our woes, globalisation. We see the innocent perish and we certainly see the upright destroyed. We see people that rob others of their lands, their homes, their children and their dignities, those that perform illegal medical procedures (such as back-street abortions) on them, we see them live in comfort while those from whom they have stolen, those, that they have injured, suffer from the consequences of the oppressors' actions. Job sees this in his own time too. In Job 24 he recognises that those who have seized flocks that were not their own, and those who have robbed the widow and the orphan are 'blessed' with long life and security. Common sense does not seem to work here.

b. Observation

The second source of authority noted by Newsom is observance. It is Eliphaz again who draws on this source of authority:

As I have seen, those who plough iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. (Job 4:8 NRSV).

The perspective from which Eliphaz made this observation is important for our analysis. As Job's friend, he obviously has to be a wealthy man. One would be right in thinking that he was probably a wealthy farmer as well. From his perspective, an example of 'those who sow trouble' would probably be those poor peasants who do not pay their debt! These people would then reap their 'just' punishment by having their children seized from them for not paying their debts. From the perspective of a wealthy farmer, such as Eliphaz, this is the kind of injustice by which the world is ruled. He is not able to identify with the plight of the poor, and he is able to make the kind of judgmental remarks which he makes because the perspective from which he 'observes' prevents him from having any other insight into this issue.

I would think that Job, being a wealthy farmer, would have 'observed' from a similar perspective. Chapter 24, however, portrays Job as lamenting the cause of the innocent poor, who are never allowed to reap the benefits of their hard work:

There are those who snatch the orphan child from the breast, and take as a pledge the infant of the poor. They go about naked, without clothing; though hungry, they carry the sheaves; between their terraces they press out oil; they tread the wine presses, but suffer thirst. From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer (Job 24:9-12 NRSV).

The question must be asked: What causes Job to have such a different view from his friend?

I would think that it is only because he himself is now in a situation of poverty that he is able to think through these issues of unjust suffering more

clearly. Have you ever heard the saying 'walk a mile in my shoes?' Job has now walked for some time in the shoes of the poor, in the shoes of the sick, in the shoes of the oppressed. In other words, it is only because he himself has now suffered unjustly that he is able to see things from the perspective of the poor. Were he not, I suspect that his conversation would have taken the form of conversations that we hear around a barbeque (or in some cultures, the water cooler!). These conversations centre on 'common sense observations' such as 'African people are most infected by HIV and AIDS because African people are by nature more promiscuous.' This calls us in this context of HIV and AIDS to also 'walk a mile in HIV-positive persons' shoes.' If we did, if we understood their contexts and their backgrounds, and the injustice they had to endure, then we might not be so quick to judge; instead like Job, we too might cry and lament over the fact that people who work hard do not always 'get what they deserve.'

Unfortunately, Job's transformation is ambiguous (it has two sides, or two meanings). Although Job reveals his unity with the oppressed, he again slips into his role as a wealthy patriarch in Job chapter 29 and 30. Here he fondly remembers the times in which he commanded respect from the poor. He again shows his contempt and his dislike for them with the words:

But now they make sport of me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock. What could I gain from the strength of their hands? All their vigour is gone. Through want and hard hunger they gnaw the dry and desolate ground, they pick mallow and the leaves of the bushes, and to warm themselves the roots of broom. They are driven out from society; people shout after them as after a thief. In the gullies of wadis they must live, in holes of the ground, and in the rocks. Among the bushes they bray; under the nettles they huddle

together. A senseless, disreputable brood, they have been whipped out of the land. And now they mock me in song; I am a byword to them (Job 30:1-9 NRSV).

These words are from a man who is himself now suffering! Job still sees the poor through his own judgemental attitude! He still sees himself as 'higher' and 'better' than the poor. Remember his patriarchal setting allows this. Patriarchy permits hierarchy. That means that patriarchy allows a system where one person can be higher than another. Hence, if a man can be better than a woman, then the rich can be better than the poor, white can be better than black, and in our own context HIV-negative people can be better than those who are HIV-positive. Thus Job at this point does not understand the nature of unjust suffering fully, neither do his friends.



ACTIVITY 2



- Do you have systems of hierarchy (that is, an order of high to low) in your family, your community or your church?*
- 1. Who are at the top?*
 - 2. Who are at the bottom?*
 - 3. Provide reasons for the situation.*

c. Theology

The third source of authority identified by Newsom is theology and what is called a 'transcendent authority of revelation.' Now I know that these might sound like big words, but it simply refers to a claim by people that they have heard directly from God. In other words, God has spoken directly to them.

Have you ever heard people say: 'God said to me,' or 'the Lord told me'? When people say this they are making a claim to a 'transcendent authority of revelation.'

Elihu, the last friend who comes to visit Job draws most strongly on this theological source of authority:

Therefore, hear me, you who have sense, far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to their deeds he will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them. Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice (Job 34:10-12 NRSV).

Eliphaz also draws on this transcendent source of authority:

A spirit glided past my face, and hair of my flesh bristled. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice: Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker? (Job 4:15-17 NRSV)

Both Elihu and Eliphaz seem to speak great truths. Most people who claim to have heard directly from God seem to speak great truths don't they? Elihu draws on well-known theological precepts, while Eliphaz goes further to say that God has actually spoken directly to him. Who can argue with that? Who can argue with someone who has claimed to have heard directly from God! How can one dispute a claim when one has said 'Thus said the Lord!' Who indeed can argue with God?

Apparently Job can! You see, Job and his friends are talking from a theoretical point of view. In other words, their words are exactly that – words! They are not grounded in any concrete experience. Job cannot afford the luxury of fancy words or ideas or theories. He has to find another way to speak about his suffering. He has to find a way of separating himself from the trap of theological language. The only way that he can do this is to insist on his own experience as a valid and legitimate source of God-talk. He cannot talk in theory when his suffering is a reality. When confronting the theological arguments of his friends he moves beyond his own suffering to the suffering of others as well. He sees that those who cause the suffering live on. If God does not pervert justice, then why is it all the same? Why does God destroy “both the blameless and the wicked”? (Job 9:22 NRSV). Job homes in on the realities of the unjust suffering of people without getting entangled in the theological language. He can speak only from his own reality and the reality of those who suffer.

Job’s friends ask him to find peace with God, who, in this case, does not seem to be the answer to his suffering:

Agree with God, and be at peace; in this way good will come to you. (Job 22:21 NRSV)

Job cannot be at peace with this God and at the same time accept his suffering. He has to question and wrestle with God. Eventually, theoretical (ideas and word-based) theological thinking, which talks about God such as those offered by Job’s friends become useless to Job. He ultimately learns how to talk to God. In doing this he is able to secure a response from God.

In our context of HIV and AIDS we too seem to want to talk to People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) about God. We want to tell them how God

judges them, what God thinks of them, and why God is allowing them to suffer. Perhaps we need to let People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) talk to God themselves. What gives us the right to speak on behalf of God? Like Job's friends, we too feel that we have a claim on God which other people do not. We have to allow HIV-positive people and People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) talk and to listen to God themselves. We are not God's authority, and we who do not suffer are not the authority on suffering! Only the God who has suffered (in Christ), can listen to people who are suffering!!



ACTIVITY 3



1. *Do you know of Christians who have made claims about why God has allowed HIV and AIDS to happen?*
2. *What is the foundation of their arguments?*

GOD'S RESPONSE: THE VOICE FROM THE STORM

When Job eventually begins to talk to God himself, instead of trying to hear God through the voice of his friends, he challenges God to appear, either to charge him with wrongdoing or to vindicate him. God eventually answers Job in a voice from the storm or the whirlwind (Job 38-42:6).

Although scholars have warned us not to make too much of the speeches made by God, I think that our search for those resources in the Book of Job which can help PLWHA and the affected will be incomplete if we do not examine the divine speeches.

Firstly, it is important for us to note that there is no general agreement regarding the meaning of the divine speeches. Some scholars argue that “God’s zoo full of animals is irrelevant to Job’s question” (Bechtel 1995:222). In fact, most scholars would agree that God does not answer Job’s questions directly. Instead, as Van Wolde (1995:209) notes, “God chooses the arena of creation rather than the Hall of justice” to address Job’s troubling and complex questions. God answers Job with equally complex statements that seem to have little to do with the questions posed. However, if we examine the text closely enough it is possible to find that every aspect of God’s appearance is important for the way in which we interpret the divine speeches.

Bechtel (1995:237) demonstrates that even God’s appearance in a storm is significant. A storm, she says, can be both destructive (as a flood) or can bring life (through much needed rain). Hence, when God chooses to appear in a storm it is important. It shows God’s two-sided nature, that there may be more to God than we think. Job and his friends had seen God, through their own patriarchal (male-dominated) lenses. But the God who meets Job is not this great patriarch. This kind of re-reading of the way in which God is perceived is indeed significant for our own reading of the Book of Job, in the HIV and AIDS context. The reason that some Christians cannot see that HIV and AIDS is not a punishment from God is because the vision they have of God is that of a Great Patriarch – one who sits in judgement of his clan, when they have erred in their ways, when they have sinned. We have to change the way in which we see God in order to change the way in which we see God in our suffering.

The very form of God’s appearance to Job is important for the way in which we think about God in times of suffering. The second factor is the content of God’s speeches. If you read the Book of Job carefully you will see that God

does not seem to answer Job's questions directly. The point, however, is not that God has not chosen to answer Job; it is that God has chosen to answer Job in a way that is very radically different from the way in which Job expects. Job's categories (as well as his friends), of speaking of God have been inadequate, (that is, not enough, insufficient). Job and his friends' wisdom-thinking do not allow them to think of God differently. God does not show Job directly what his thinking should be changed to. Rather, God points Job towards a different way of thinking by asking Job questions:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall
declare to me (Job 38:2-3 NRSV).

This question is meant to guide Job towards a new way of thinking. God does not act as a Great Patriarch, enforcing laws as to how God is supposed to be understood in the midst of suffering. Instead, God points out to Job issues, other than simple and basic ideas about justice, punishment and reward. Rather, God points him to the miracle of nature, both its uncertainty and the control that exists in nature.

The question however remains. If God does not give Job an answer, but only leads him away from his theological thinking, then where is God leading Job through the divine speeches? God leads Job to a point where Job can say:

Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I
have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for
me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question
you, and you declare to me' I had heard of you by the hearing of
the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and
repent in dust and ashes' (Job 42:3-6 NRSV).

What are the things that Job did not understand, and the things that were too wonderful for him to know? Is this God's simple answer to the problem of suffering: that God is in control of everything and therefore God can choose to do as God likes? Are we meant to leave the text of Job with an impression of God as an uncontrolled, impulsive persecutor? I am sure that none of us believe this to be the case.

If God does not give us an answer as to how to talk about God in times of suffering, what are we left with? What are we supposed to think? God may not have given us an answer as how to talk about God in suffering, but God has certainly provided an answer as to how NOT to talk about God in times of suffering.

You see, Job's friends were stuck in the idea that something is either black or white. There is no room for grey areas. There was punishment for bad deeds and reward for good deeds. This was the law of wisdom. Job was also stuck in this understanding of punishment and reward. It is for this reason that he constantly begs God to show him where he had gone wrong, so that he could repent and not be 'punished' anymore. Even though Job asks for this, his experience tells him otherwise and he constantly protests that he has done no wrong and that he is innocent.

Even though Job knew the theory of wisdom, his own experience was taking him to a new level of understanding, especially in his questioning with regard to the poor. Unfortunately, Job constantly gets trapped in his limited understanding of God. What he eventually realises is that God is not confined to the categories in which we want to box God. Rather, God is much more complex than that. The fact that Job begins to realise this is what prompts God to pronounce that Job's friends have not spoken well of God. It is Job that has.

Job has caught a glimpse of this God who may not be this old man with a long beard that sits on a throne somewhere, keeping a record of all the wrongs people have done and then punishing them. Job has seen a different God, a more complex God.



ACTIVITY 4



Summarise, in your own words, why God's choice to appear in a storm is significant for our understanding of God in our HIV and AIDS contexts.

A SOLUTION TO SUFFERING?

As we have seen from our examination of the speeches of Job's friends and the responses of both Job and God, the Book of Job does not offer us a solution to the problem of suffering. Neither Job, nor his friends, or even God give us the answer to the question of suffering. Rather, what the Book of Job does is to tell us how NOT to talk about God in times of suffering. By having an in-road to the text through Job's wife and through Job's poverty, women and the poor who make up the majority of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) can identify with the text. Hence, the text speaks to those who suffer the most.

Even if the text does not provide all the answers, what it has done is to suggest that the answers we think we do have, are in fact inadequate. Perhaps the answers we have are incomplete and are not representative of the whole picture. Maybe there is much more to suffering than meets the eye! This in itself provides a way in which to speak against those who say that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God. This knowledge calls us to show compassion.

Why then do people suffer?

The Book of Job does not answer this question. What it does rather is to provide another voice, an alternative voice to the traditional wisdom-voice of punishment and reward. An alternative voice to this tradition, that is so ingrained in our sacred texts, in our societies and in our minds, that we are shaken by its candour. This view, presented from our re-reading of the text of Job, provides a new starting point from which PLWHA and the affected can begin talk to talk of God in the midst of their suffering and pain.

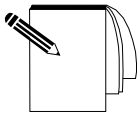


SUMMARY

As we have seen from our examination of Job's friends' speeches and Job's response and God's response, the Book of Job does not offer us a solution to the problem of suffering. Neither Job, nor his friends, or even God give us the answer to the question of suffering. What the Book of Job does rather is to tell us how NOT to talk about God in times of suffering. By having an in-road to the text through Job's wife and through Job's poverty, both women and the poor who make up the majority of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) can identify with the text. So the text speaks to those who suffer the most.

Even if the text does not provide all the answers, what it has done is suggested that maybe the answers which we think we have are actually inadequate and incomplete and do not provide the entire picture. Maybe there is more to suffering than that which meets the eye! This in itself provides a way in which to speak against those who say that HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God. It thus calls us to show compassion.

Why do people suffer? The Book of Job does not answer this question. What it does rather is provide another voice, an alternative voice to the traditional wisdom-voice of punishment and reward. An alternative voice to this tradition that is so ingrained in our sacred texts, in our societies and in our minds that we are shaken by this alternative view. The alternative views presented from our re-reading of the text of Job must provide a new starting point from which People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) and the affected can begin talk to talk of God in the midst of their suffering and pain.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. *Name the three sources of authority which Job's friends use to show that Job was being punished.*
2. *Show how these sources named above are not adequate for our context of HIV and AIDS.*
3. *What can you observe from God's response to Job?*
4. *Explain why it is significant that God appears in a storm?*
5. *Describe how the Book of Job deals with the problem of suffering.*



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UNIT 9

STUDYING THE BOOK OF HOSEA IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the ninth unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. In this unit we will examine the problem of violence against women in our societies, exploring in particular the links between violence against women and HIV and AIDS. We will then explore the metaphor of a violent marriage as found in the Book of Hosea, comparing it to that of a loving relationship as described in the Song of Songs. Finally, the implications of re-reading the text in our HIV and AIDS contexts will be analysed in detail.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Describe** the situation of violence against women in our societies
- ⌘ **Explain** the links between violence against women and HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ **Describe** the metaphor of marriage in the Book of Hosea
- ⌘ **Compare** the metaphor of a violent marriage as presented in the Book of Hosea to the loving relationship presented in the Book of Song of Songs
- ⌘ **Describe** the implications of reading the Book of Hosea in our HIV and AIDS contexts

TOPICS

- ⌘ Brief overview of the Book of Hosea
- ⌘ The situation of violence against women
- ⌘ Links between violence against women and HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ The metaphor of a violent marriage in the Book of Hosea
- ⌘ The Song of Songs
- ⌘ Violence in Hosea and HIV and AIDS
- ⌘ Summary
- ⌘ Self-assessment activity
- ⌘ Further Reading

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF HOSEA

The dating of Hosea, as with all other Hebrew Bible writings is problematic. Nonetheless it is assumed that Hosea was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, in the period shortly before the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria. It is also assumed that Hosea's operated as prophet during the Northern Kingdom's most unstable period, when four kings may have reigned within the space of one year! Hosea's prophetic voice may have thus been heard during this time of much confusion.



ACTIVITY 1



Before we begin our study together of the Book of Hosea, it is important that you read the first three chapters of the Book of Hosea. Please also take time also to read Song of Songs. It only has eight chapters and makes for better reading than any other secular romance novel you may find!

The Book of Hosea can be divided into three parts:

- ⌘ Chapters 1-3 relating to the life and the marriage of Hosea;
- ⌘ Chapters 4-13 consisting of a series of prophetic messages against Northern Israel;
- ⌘ Chapter 14 being a message of repentance, hope and promise.

For our present purpose, we will concentrate on Chapters 1-3.



ACTIVITY 2



Write down in your own words a brief summary of the first three chapters of the Book of Hosea

THE SITUATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN – A CASE STUDY: KAYLA’S STORY (A TRUE STORY)

Kayla has been married for sixteen years now, and has two children (boys aged 15 and 9 years). Her husband, Peter, has been beating her periodically, for a number of years. They both come from working class backgrounds, with little education. She works in a shoe factory and he works casually. He is an alcoholic. They belong to an evangelical church, one that does not ordain women, nor allow them to participate equally in the life and activities of the church. Kayla’s asthmatic. Her youngest son is also asthmatic and epileptic.

The last beating that Kayla received from her husband was particularly severe. X-rays showed that she had a crack in her skull. She decided that she wanted to end this marriage. Because they were living with her mother, she asked Peter to move out. The pastor and the elder immediately came over to visit telling Kayla that:

The Bible says that divorce is wrong;

The man is the head of the woman therefore she is supposed to submit to him;

By not cooking and doing other household chores, which a wife is supposed to do for her husband, she inevitably brought on the abuse.

Then Kayla's sister comes along and gives her good sisterly advice. "You see, Kayla, according to our culture, you are not a good wife. You should wake up early in the morning and pack lunch for your husband. Peter says that you don't iron his trousers with a neat lining - how many times has mummy taught us how to do that? His clothes are not washed, ironed, folded and put into his cupboard on time so that every morning he has to look for socks; He also says that his food is not ready when he comes home really hungry. Kayla, you should really try to be a better wife. Then maybe Peter won't beat you so badly."

Kayla protests that she leaves home two and a half hours before he does, while it is still dark. She says that she comes home only after him therefore it is difficult to have food ready on time before he is

home. She says that sometimes she has to take leave from work and spend the whole day in a public hospital with her youngest son who is asthmatic and epileptic. She protests that she is often very tired and very sick...

Her protests fall on deaf ears. Her sister tells her that she should return to her husband, and learn how to be a good wife. Her pastor tells her that she should return to her husband, pray for him, and submit to his will. Her friends at work tell her that it is very disgraceful for a woman to leave her husband: "What would people say? Return to him," they tell her.

She does. The following week he punches her in the face again.



ACTIVITY 3



1. *Identify the forms of abuse you can find in this case study, proving your answers with sentences from the text.*
2. *Discuss how you would have advised Kayla if you were her: (a) Pastor (b) Friend (c) Sister.*

There are three factors which contribute to Kayla's story of physical violence.

These are:

- ⌘ The interpretation of the Bible (as shown by the Pastor's refusal to allow Kayla to divorce her abusive husband);
- ⌘ The interpretation of cultures (certain jobs such as ironing and cooking are reserved for only women);
- ⌘ The interpretation of society (society says that it is shameful for a woman to leave her husband).

Of all the factors that contribute to Kayla's story I am most interested in the first: the interpretation of the Bible. How is it that the Bible is interpreted in a way that can contribute to violence against women? If the Bible is supposed to be a sacred text where we receive comfort and strength and guidance, how can the Bible be used to put a woman's life in danger? The truth is, it can! Hence, unless we find new ways to re-read the Bible, it will remain in the hands of those who want to promote violence.



ACTIVITY 4



1. *Find out from a local NGO, or other such institution that deals with violence against women, the numbers of women who have been beaten or killed by their partners during the past year.*
2. *Analyse the statistics in relation to what you know of violence against women in your community.*

LINKS BETWEEN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HIV AND AIDS

According to the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, violence against women still occurs in all societies and cultures. Many women and girls are still afraid of physical, psychological or sexual assault. Often, even when women suspect that they or their partners may have HIV, they refuse to get counselling or even testing, because they are afraid that their partners or families will react violently towards them. Remember the cases of Gugu Dlamini and Tembi, from unit 7? One of the commonest forms of violence is physical violence against women by their partners. Between 10% and 69% of women globally report physical abuse by their partners. According to Human Rights Watch, domestic violence is one of the leading causes of female injuries in almost every country in the world.

So what are the links between HIV and violence against women? Many studies have shown that violence against women is a key reason why women are more likely to contract HIV than men. Not only is it a driving force behind the epidemic, but HIV infection is often a consequence of violence against women. The risk of contracting HIV is higher through violent or forceful sex. The bruises that are caused through forceful sex are what contribute to the easier entry of the virus into the blood stream.

The Eldis Website reports the following:

“ ”

QUOTATION

According to a study published in 2004, women who are beaten or dominated by their partners are much more likely to become infected by HIV than women who live in non-violent households. This research was based on 1,366 South African women who attended health centres in Soweto and agreed to be tested for HIV and interviewed about their home lives. After being adjusted for factors that could distort the outcome, the figures showed that women who were beaten by their husbands or boyfriends were 48% more likely to become infected by HIV than those who were not. Those who were emotionally or financially dominated by their partners were 52% more likely to be infected than those who were not. A smaller study in Tanzania found that HIV-positive women were over two and a half times more likely to have experienced violence by their partner than HIV-negative women. A recent study on sexual violence and risk of HIV infection in South Africa, conducted in over 5,000 classrooms for 10 to 19 year-olds, highlighted widespread perceptions about intimate partner violence. It showed that 60.8% of 10-14 year old and 55.2% of 15-19 year old males believed that sexual violence does not include forcing sex with someone you know. For females 62% of 10-14 year olds and 58.1% of 15-19 year olds held the same belief.

This is the bleak reality of the link between HIV and AIDS and violence against women. Bearing this in mind, we will now proceed to our reading of the Book of Hosea.

THE METAPHOR OF A VIOLENT MARRIAGE IN HOSEA

The Book of Hosea opens with an instruction to the prophet Hosea to marry a Commercial Sex-worker. The text says:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord' (Hosea 1:2 NRSV)

It is thus clear that the book opens with a marriage metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech that is used to compare one thing with another. For example, if I say that you are a lion, I am not saying that you are literally a lion. What I am saying is that you may possess the qualities of a lion. By using the metaphor I may be referring to your strength, intelligence, or sense of authority.

In the Book of Hosea, when God asks Hosea "to take for yourself a wife of whoredom," there is a point. Israel is the whore (represented by the woman, Gomer). God is the husband (represented by the man, Hosea). Why "a wife of whoredom" you may ask? Well, because God wants to show that Israel has been unfaithful to God, therefore Israel is like a woman who has been unfaithful to her husband.

Some people may ask, what is the problem with this? Hosea wants to illustrate a point. Well, it does not stop there. The metaphor becomes more graphic. Hence we read:

...I will strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst. Upon her children also I will have no pity, because they are children of whoredom. For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and flax, my oil and my drink' (Hosea 2:3-5 NRSV).

So, the woman is stripped naked, and beaten in front of her lovers. She is called all sorts of names. Sexual activity and economic help is withheld. But... we say it is still just a metaphor for God's relationship with Israel. There are a number of problems with this metaphor:

- ⌘ God is identified with a male - with Hosea - the husband. Israel is identified with the female - the wife. The problem with this, as Mary Daly famously said is: "If God is male then male is God." The meaning of this is that men feel that they can dominate because they are identified with God. They feel that they are powerful because they are not the women in this metaphor - they are identified with God. Studies have shown, as we have said above, that violence against women is linked to the idea of dominance. So, embedded in this metaphor is dominance.
- ⌘ The other problem with this metaphor is that it re-enforces the belief that women are related to sin. In other words, by identifying the woman as a prostitute we already judge her. By identifying a woman with Israel's sin it further casts her in a bad light. We saw from the creation stories how women were blamed from the beginning of time for sin. In our HIV and AIDS contexts we find that women are blamed for introducing the disease.

It has been shown that women are afraid to have HIV tests because they would then be blamed if it were found to be HIV-positive.

⌘ The third and most obvious problem is that there is so much of violence in this text. The man is allowed to beat her, to withhold sex, to even expose her private parts and violate her sexually. In our context of HIV and AIDS these actions also still seem acceptable. Why? Because they are accepted as cultural. Up until recently, this metaphor, like the rape of the virgins in the Book of Esther which we studied in unit 6, has gone unquestioned. Israel took it as a valid and legitimate punishment for wrongdoing on the part of the woman.

But, people may still argue that it is just a metaphor. Well, as we said a metaphor compares two things. Most times, in order for the metaphor to be valid or to have some truth, it has to be compared to something that is true or something that rings true. Thus for example, if I wanted to convey the message that you are capable of betraying me, I might very well call you a Judas. You will only accept that metaphor as true if you believe that Judas did actually betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. However, if you did not believe that such a thing could have happened you would say that the metaphor is untrue.

I have a friend who is Jewish. She was telling me how upset she was one day when she overheard in a shop a customer fighting with the owner because he had short-changed him. The customer kept on saying to the owner: "Stop being a Jew and give me my correct change." Of course, the owner was not a Jew, but the customer's assumption in comparing him with a Jew was that all Jews are money cheats. This was what he thought. But, the owner could have only understood his true meaning if he really believed that Jews were cheats.

In the same way, in the Book of Hosea, when we compare God's relationship with Israel to a violent marriage between a man and a Commercial Sex-worker, we are in fact saying that that which defines a violent marriage must be true, it must be valid. Thus, beating a woman and exposing her sexual parts is an example that people can understand, therefore they will accept the metaphor.

Why should people understand such a metaphor if it is something that is unacceptable in society?

By accepting the metaphor we are acknowledging that this is acceptable behaviour; therefore it is an acceptable metaphor. Can we afford this kind of violent metaphor in our context of HIV and AIDS? It is like using the metaphor of beating a slave until s/he bleeds, until s/he loses all her/his dignity, to illustrate the point. Imagine if the Book of Hosea was based on that metaphor. Would we accept it today? Would we say that it was just a metaphor? I am sure that we would not. And yet we accept this as a metaphor.



ACTIVITY 5



1. *Explain the term 'metaphor'.*
2. *Discuss how the metaphor used in Hosea can be acceptable in our HIV and AIDS contexts.*

THE SONG OF SONGS

A metaphor is a powerful figure of speech. It can be used to convey beautiful messages, but also dangerous messages as we have seen from our examination of the Book of Hosea.

One place where it is used to convey a beautiful message is in the Book of Song of Songs. The Song of Songs captures love songs about human, physical love.

In reading the Song of Songs, many people, even today, would rather see it as a metaphor, because they are so embarrassed by the explicit sexual imagery and because we have been taught that sexuality and the expression of sexuality is shameful in public. Personally, I would rather take the Song of Songs as an expression of romantic and sexual love between a man and a woman, because we should not be ashamed of that, and therefore we should not have to spiritualise it.



ACTIVITY 6



1. *Read the Book of Song of Songs.*
2. *Outline the main points of the Book.*

I am sure your activity question would have shown you that the love relationship portrayed here has been long-taken to represent the love between God and Israel.

So let's assume that it is a metaphor. Why is it that when the bodies of both men and women are shown to be source of joy and pleasure, that we want to shy away from it. Why is it that we don't hear many sermons about erotic love, even though it is beautiful? Why do preachers shy away from it, even as a metaphor?

Yet, we are drawn to the violent marriage metaphor in Hosea. People find it easier to digest the violent marriage metaphor in Hosea than they do the erotic metaphor of love in the Song of Songs. This has many implications for HIV and AIDS. It means that we would rather teach as human norms violent marriages rather than loving relationships. Because we are so ashamed of our sexualities we find sexuality to be more shameful than that of a violent marriage! Violent sex speaks to us more than beautiful, loving, mutually enjoyed, erotic love! The Song of Songs is a marvellous celebration of the gift of sexuality. This metaphor went wrong somewhere in the Book of Hosea.



ACTIVITY 7



Contrast and compare the Book of Song of Songs with the Book of Hosea.

VIOLENCE IN HOSEA AND HIV AND AIDS

We established at the very beginning of this unit that violence against women and HIV and AIDS are linked. The Book of Hosea seems to condone violence against women by using a metaphor of violence against women to make a theological point. In a context where the Bible is seen as the 'Word of God,' and is viewed as a guide for the way in which we are supposed to live our lives, such a metaphor is seen to possess truth if people can identify with it. If

a man is beating his partner and he reads the Book of Hosea, he might think that his actions are justified since even God beats women!

In a context where women are dying everyday from HIV and AIDS due to violence against them, such a text cannot continue to be read without us questioning the basis of the text.

What then do we do with such texts that condone and sanction violence against women?

As we have done with the Song of Songs, I think that we should:

- ⌘ Interrogate the text for their original meaning and intention;
- ⌘ Expose their deeper meaning as harmful;
- ⌘ Find alternatives to the text.

This is crucial if we want to win in our fight against HIV and AIDS. The Bible is a very important part of the Christian's life and faith. So much so, that a study conducted by Isabel Phiri in 2000 in Durban, South Africa, showed that 84% of a group of 25 women who were married to leaders in the church had experienced some sort of domestic violence in their lives (Phiri 2000:85-110). Almost all the women admitted to staying in abusive relationships because they believed that this is what the Bible required of them.

Such research very clearly shows the impact that the Bible has on believers. Therefore, it is not enough in our HIV and AIDS context to simply say that the violent marriage metaphor in Hosea is just a metaphor. HIV and AIDS calls us to admit that its impact is much more than a metaphor therefore we have to find new ways of reading such texts.



ACTIVITY 8



Summarise in your own words how you think the violent metaphor in Hosea can be re-interpreted in our HIV and AIDS contexts.

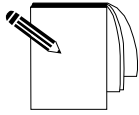


SUMMARY

Congratulations! You have now successfully completed unit 9 of our studies together in the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts.

I trust that you have learned much in this unit. We began by sketching the situation of violence against women in our communities, showing through a case study that the interpretation of the Bible plays a large and conspicuous role in the situation of violence against women. We then established the link between violence against women and HIV and AIDS, and said that HIV and AIDS was both the cause and the result of many instances of violence against women.

Turning to the Book of Hosea, we revealed why the metaphor of a violent marriage is so problematic. Comparing this metaphor of a violent marriage to that of erotic love as portrayed in the Book of Song of Songs, we contended that this beautiful metaphor of erotic love between two people should be employed instead of the metaphor of violence contained with the Book of Hosea. We concluded our study together by highlighting once again the link between violence against women and HIV and AIDS, and said that HIV and AIDS calls us to re-read such problematic texts.



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. *By relating it to the case study provided, write down in your own words the present situation of violence against women. In your answer explain what factors are involved.*
2. *Describe the links between violence against women and HIV and AIDS.*
3. *In your own words, give a detailed explanation as to why the violent marriage metaphor in Hosea is so problematic.*
4. *Summarise in your own words the meaning of the erotic love metaphor in the Book of Song of Songs. Explain why it is important to retrieve this metaphor.*
5. *What are the consequences of the use of Hosea's violent marriage metaphor in our HIV and AIDS contexts?*



FURTHER READING

- Khathide, Agrippa G. 2003. Teaching and Talking About Our Sexuality: A Means of Combating HIV/AIDS. Pages 1-9 in *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Mainstreaming HIV and AIDS in the Curriculum*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Dube Musa W. and Fulata L. Moyo. 2003. Violence. Pages 229-241 in *AfricaPraying: A Handbook of HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko Sam, Ezra Chitando and Gideon Byamugisha. 2003. Sexuality. Pages 133-140 in *AfricaPraying: A Handbook of HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Weems, R. J. 1995. *Battered Love, Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis.

UNIT 10

STUDYING THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

OVERVIEW

Welcome to the tenth unit of the Studying the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS Contexts module. Can you believe it? We have reached the final unit of this module. In the last unit we looked at the Book of Hosea, and how the negative metaphor of violence in the Book of Hosea can be unhelpful, no - downright deadly, in the context of HIV and AIDS in which we live.

Although the important message of Hosea may sometimes become lost in the unhelpful metaphor of violent marriage which we explored in the unit 9, the purpose of the Hebrew prophets was to bring to the people important messages concerning the justice of God. Not only do they tell the people of their injustices, but they bring a message of hope.

In this module, we have in a way followed a prophetic model. If you look back on our studies together, you will notice that we have highlighted those areas of oppression and injustice which contribute and influence the scourge of HIV and AIDS in our communities. These include gender injustice, stigma and discrimination and poverty. At the same time though, we also presented alternative views which call us to act and behave differently. These alternative views present us with some sense of hope.

It is appropriate, therefore, in this our last unit together, that I provide you with some hope for the future. I will attempt to do this in three particular ways:

- ⌘ First, we will sketch the situation of apparent hopelessness, in our HIV and AIDS contexts where millions are dying each day;
- ⌘ Second, we will do an analysis of Ezekiel 37:1-14, in order to find a message of hope in the apparent hopelessness of HIV and AIDS in the African context;
- ⌘ Finally, we will see how we can move towards a Biblical hermeneutics of healing.

OBJECTIVES

Upon the successful completion of this unit you should be able to:

- ⌘ **Describe** the situation of hopelessness with regard to HIV and AIDS in the African context
- ⌘ **Describe** the context in which Ezekiel was writing
- ⌘ **Analyse** the text of Ezekiel 37:1-14 with a view to finding hope
- ⌘ **Describe** the implications of studying the books of the Hebrew Bible for hope in HIV and AIDS contexts

TOPICS


- ⌘ The situation of hopelessness in the face of HIV and AIDS in Africa
- ⌘ Brief overview of the Book of Ezekiel
- ⌘ Analysing the valley of dry bones: Ezekiel 37:1-14
- ⌘ Studying Ezekiel for hope in HIV and AIDS contexts
- ⌘ Summary

⌘ Self-assessment activity

⌘ Further reading

THE SITUATION OF HOPELESSNESS IN THE FACE OF HIV AND AIDS IN AFRICA

According to the website of the AIDS charity AVERT, which draws statistics from UNAIDS, this is the current situation of AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa:



QUOTATION

The area in Africa south of the Sahara desert, Sub-Saharan Africa, is by far the worst affected in the world by the AIDS epidemic. The region has just over 10% of the world's population, but is home to over 60% of all people living with HIV. An estimated 3.1 million adults and children became infected with HIV during the year 2004. This brought the total number of people living with HIV and AIDS in the region to 25.4 million by the end of the year.

HIV prevalence continues to rise because there are still new individuals joining the pool of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) each and every day, than there is people leaving it through death. However, as those already infected succumb to AIDS-related illnesses (the average survival rate in absence of antiretroviral therapy is estimated to be around 8 to 10 years), mortality from AIDS is increasing, and the long-awaited mass rollout of Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ARVs) has still not taken place in many countries, HIV infection rates continue to increase virtually un-hindered across the continent, ranging from less than 1% in Mauritania to almost 40% in Botswana and Swaziland.

AIDS killed approximately 2.3 million people in 2004. In the coming years, unless there is far broader access to life-prolonging Anti-Retroviral Therapy

(ARV), and providing that new infections do not start rising again, the number of surviving HIV-positive Africans can be expected to stabilise and finally shrink, as AIDS increasingly claims the lives of those already infected.

Unlike women in other regions in the world, African women are considerably more likely – at least 1.2 times – to be infected with HIV than men. There are a number of reasons why female HIV prevalence is higher than male in this region, including the greater efficiency of male-to-female HIV transmission through sexual contact and the younger age of initial infection by women.

This is not a very hopeful picture is it? In fact, with the figures of new HIV infections rising daily, the situation seems practically hopeless. But is this the last word?



ACTIVITY 1



Write down in your own words the story of hopelessness in your country at the moment with regard to HIV and AIDS.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

Africa closely resembles Ezekiel's valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Everywhere we look we seem to be surrounded by death, by bones, by skeletons. Ezekiel 37: 1-14 presents us with a vision of hopelessness. But is this the entire story?

Before we do an analysis of this text it will first be helpful to have a brief overview of the book as a whole.

Ezekiel was a prophet around the 6th century BCE. He seems to be prophesying at the time when the people of Judah were captive in Babylon. Ezekiel was in all probability an Exile himself. He seems to have been an oral prophet; hence his words may have been written at a later time.

Ezekiel is thus prophesying at the time when the Temple, the symbol of hope and of God for the people of Israel lay in ruins, and the people are in captivity. Understandably, this is a time when the people of Israel could easily feel that God had abandoned them, having given them up to be dominated and ruled by another nation.



ACTIVITY 2



Write down in your own words a brief summary of the Book of Ezekiel

ANALYSING THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES: EZEKIEL 37:1-14

It is in this context of hopelessness and apparent divine abandonment that the prophet Ezekiel is taken to the valley of dry bones:

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O LORD God, you know' (Ezekiel 37:1-3 NRSV).

Given the situation in which Ezekiel was writing, the valley of dry bones has been taken to symbolise the conquered and the downtrodden people of Israel.

Faced with the situation of hopelessness and death all around, Ezekiel feels a sense of personal hopelessness. This is why when God asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel replies that only God knows. In other words, Ezekiel does not see any ability within him to make these dry bones live. It is not that he is completely without faith, though. If he were completely without faith he would have said: "Never! How can dead bones live again?" But that is not what he said. Rather, he did believe that God could perhaps make them live again, but that depends on God – that is, whether God would want those bones to live again? Whether God would want to restore the people of Israel to their land, taking away their pain and healing them. Ezekiel does not seem to know whether he can make this happen. He believes that only God knows the answer.

Ezekiel's context of hopeless and divine abandonment is in a certain sense similar to our contexts of HIV and AIDS. Many people feel that a similar sense of hopelessness and powerlessness because the situation of HIV and AIDS is something beyond their control, because it is a disease that has no cure. It is only God who can provide the answer, and God seems to have abandoned them.

But this is not true. There are many things that we can do – that we are called to do, as the prophets so clearly show us.

The Hebrew prophets teach us that all of us are called to justice:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8 NRSV).

What does justice have to do with HIV and AIDS?

A lot! If you have gone through this whole module very carefully you will know by now that HIV and AIDS is not just a medical or health issue. It is related to so many other factors of social injustice that the first step, one might say, is to do justice as Micah says.



ACTIVITY 3



Do you know of other Hebrew Prophets or other characters in the Bible who also felt that they could not intervene, that perhaps they were not good enough, or that it was not their place, but only God's? Have you ever felt this way? Write down, in your own words, the stories – both the Bible and your own context, when you have been in similar situations.

In the next verses, Ezekiel is challenged by God, to change his stance. Normally, in the prophets, the prophets hear a message from God and then challenge the people. Here we find that the prophet himself is being challenged by God. Notice:

Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the LORD GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.' So I prophesied as I had been

commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath.' Thus says the LORD GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude (Ezekiel 37:4-11 NRSV).

Ezekiel was waiting for God to do something, but then God turns the tables on him. God says to him: "You do something!" "You prophecy to them!" "You tell them to rise!" "You tell them to live!" "You tell them to breathe!" "You tell them to put flesh on their bones!" "You tell them!"

God's message to Ezekiel is very clear. God can bring life and hope to the dry bones, but God will not do it alone. He wants Ezekiel to get involved. Ezekiel has to take action. Again, this is what the Hebrew prophets are about, calling the people to move out of 'empty religion' and to act with a sense of vigour and determination!

Some people think that where there is such a situation of hopelessness, as in the context of HIV and AIDS, all that can be done is go to church, sing songs and pray. We cannot go to church and sing songs and pray when we do not speak out about the injustices against the poor, against women, against the abused children, against those with HIV and AIDS. If we do not speak out against these injustices, then in certain sense we become part of the problem ourselves. As Amos can prophecy, God does not want our worship songs, but rather the doing of justice:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream (Amos 5:21-24 NRSV).

We cannot carry on with our religious rituals, while sitting back in the face of this great hopelessness which we see all around us and say like Ezekiel that “only God knows.” Yes, God does know, but God requires that we act on God’s behalf in this world. That is our divine calling as Christians.



ACTIVITY 4



Think of areas of injustice in your family, community or church, such as discrimination against women and children. Now think of the ways in which you can positively address these situations which ultimately can have an impact on the situations of HIV and AIDS. Write down your answers clearly and concisely.

Finally, in the last part of Ezekiel 37, we find a glimmer of hope presented.

Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the LORD GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I

will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:11-14 NRSV).

We find that the bones that are raised up through Ezekiel’s prophecy are not just the dry bones from the valley, but the bones from the entire house of Israel. Symbolically of course, this refers not only to the people of Israel, but to the people who are in Exile in Babylon. Because of Ezekiel’s actions, God is saying that there is hope even for those in Exile. The text goes even further to state that even those who are already in their graves in Babylon will be raised.

This is a powerful message in our HIV and AIDS contexts. It speaks of the way in which situations of hopelessness can actually be reversed – even eradicated – when people begin to act justly. But, it takes action. HIV does cause AIDS. That has been medically and scientifically proven, but the deeper question is what causes HIV. HIV is a virus – yes, but what helps HIV to survive and thrive? These include: Social injustices, such as violence against women, poverty, stigma and discrimination, and the abuse of children. These are some of the many factors which do not need medical doctors to resolve; rather, they require dramatic changes in the social structures which govern our societies.



ACTIVITY 5



Do you have stories of hope to tell where people have taken action, and where there has been a resultant decrease in the infection rate? Please write them down carefully and precisely.

STUDYING EZEKIEL FOR HOPE IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

What does all of this mean for us today?

The Book of Ezekiel calls us to prophecy in this great time of hopelessness in the face of HIV and AIDS. It calls us to speak to the dead dry bones and deserts of hopelessness which are all around us. We need to breathe new life into those situations, by breaking with the old, whether it is old culture or old religion, or old ideas about people and suffering.

“Can these bones live?” Yes they can, but we need to give them life. By denying women the right to choose safer sex we are saying that the bones cannot live. By allowing richer countries to dominate poor countries and to take away their essential health budgets we are saying that the dry bones cannot live. By allowing the society and the church to stigmatise those who are living with HIV and AIDS, we are saying that the dry bones cannot live.

As with Ezekiel, we are called to prophecy to the bones and to say they can live. Those with HIV and AIDS are also exiled from their communities, from their families, from their churches. Can they return to live in their homelands and can their bones still live?

The hopelessness and gloom which the Israelites felt when in Exile, is the same hopelessness and gloom that is felt by millions of people who feel exiled by HIV and AIDS. It is easier for them to give in and be dry bones than to continue to live in such pain. And yet the message of hope is still there. These dry bones can live again!

If we look at this symbolically, we have to wonder whether those bones were actually physically dead or were they alive, just living without hope after being in Exile? It has been said that many people living with HIV and AIDS die a social death long before their physical death.

The new life that was promised to Israel in Exile thousands of years ago, can be promised to us today. But we need prophets like Ezekiel who will prophecy to the contexts of HIV and AIDS, and say “rise up.”



ACTIVITY 6



Can you think of other texts in the Bible which make a similar call? Write these down.



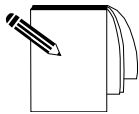
SUMMARY

Well done! You have now come to the conclusion of our unit and to the end of our module. I trust that you have found our time and studies together profitable.

We have shown in this unit, the grave situation of death and hopelessness that pertains in Africa at the present time with regard to HIV and AIDS. We went on to do a brief overview of the Book of Ezekiel before analysing a particular text in Ezekiel with a view to finding hope in the Book as a whole. We demonstrated that HIV and AIDS call us all to act justly in the face of death and hopelessness, so that as in the Book of Ezekiel, the dry bones may live again!

In terms of the module as a whole, I have used the prophetic model of liberation. In each unit, I began by exposing injustices or misinterpretations that may contribute to the problem of HIV and AIDS. Together we showed how such texts can be re-read or replaced so that they offer life rather than death in our situations of HIV and AIDS.

I am reminded of Christian Aid's (a donor organisation) slogan. It says, 'We believe in life before death!' I like that. It speaks of the real point of the Bible and of the Christian Gospel, that in spite of misinterpretations, and in spite of the culture in which it was written, at the heart of the Bible's message is a message of liberation; a message of hope. By reading the texts of the Hebrew Bible in the ways in which I have suggested, together we have tried to bring out that message. I do hope that we have succeeded!



SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

1. *Describe the situation of hopelessness in Africa with regard to HIV and AIDS. Provide facts and figures.*
2. *Analyse the text of Ezekiel 37:1 -14. Your answer should reflect what message you think this text holds for the crisis of HIV and AIDS which the African continent finds itself in.*
3. *What can you say about the links between the text of HIV and AIDS and our own calling?*
4. *What do you understand by the term 'justice'?*
5. *Why you think justice is such an important theme in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and why is it such an important theme in our own HIV and AIDS contexts?*



FURTHER READING

- Akoto, Dorothy B. E. A. 2004. Can These Bones Live? Re-reading Ezekiel in the HIV/AIDS Context. In *Grant Me Justice: HIV and AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*. Edited by Musa W. Dube and R. A. Kanyoro. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko Sam. 2003. Hope: Prophecy to These Bones. Pages 103-105. in *AfricaPraying: A Handbook of HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*. Edited by Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Stiebert, J. 2001. Does the Hebrew Bible Have Anything To Tell Us About HIV/AIDS? *Missionalia* 29/2, 174-185.



TEST FROM UNITS 6-10

INSTRUCTIONS

Congratulations on completing the final five units of this module. Please answer ALL the following questions as part of your course requirements. Your answers should be kept in a hardcover exercise book which you should keep safe for marking as evidence of having completed the first five units of this module.

a. Assignment No. 2

Write a sermon based on the Book of Esther, clearly showing:

1. The link between violence against women and HIV and AIDS.
2. How the Book of Esther 'covers up' the rape of women.
3. How society 'naturalises' rape making it socially acceptable.

b. Test No. 2

Once you have completed the above assignment, close your books, and with the use of the Bible text alone complete the following test:

1. HIV and AIDS has been often said to be a punishment from God. Show how the Book of Job is an answer against such an argument, through

an analysis of the book, highlighting how the arguments of Job's friends cannot answer his questions of suffering.



TAKE-HOME EXAMINATION: STUDYING THE HEBREW BIBLE IN HIV AND AIDS CONTEXTS

INSTRUCTIONS

This is a THREE HOUR Examination. Answer ANY FOUR of the following SIX essay-type questions. Spend no more than 45 minutes on each question.

QUESTIONS

1. It has been said that HIV and AIDS is more than a medical issue – that it is linked with ‘social injustice.’ In your essay, show how HIV and AIDS are linked to social injustice (for example, discuss how HIV and AIDS is a ‘gendered epidemic.’) Thereafter, show how using different hermeneutical methods can help us to read the Hebrew Bible in HIV and AIDS contexts.
2. Carefully read Genesis chapter 1 and Genesis chapter 2. Compare the differences between the two chapters. Using examples show how Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 demonstrate equality between the sexes and the implication this holds for a more sensitive understanding of HIV and AIDS.

3. Analyse the first three chapters of the Book of Ruth using a literary hermeneutic. Your answer should demonstrate, through examples, how certain Biblical and contemporary cultural and economic practices can be harmful in the context of HIV and AIDS.
4. Analyse the way in which the literary device of the plot and the literary device of time in the story of Esther functions. Show how these devices may conceal rape. Your answer should include an evaluation of the way in which rape has become acceptable in societies and in religious texts, and how the acceptability of rape impacts on the spread of HIV and AIDS.
5. The Book of Job has been called 'wisdom in revolt' because it is said that it challenges the wisdom idea that good people do not suffer. Write an essay in which you explain the views concerning illness and death in ancient and Biblical times. Analyse the sources of authority which each of Job's friends use to condemn him in his time of suffering, showing how this is similar to the arguments made even today against People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA).
6. Analyse the text of Ezekiel 37:1-14 with a view to finding hope in HIV and AIDS contexts. Your answer should include a description of the situation of hopelessness with regard to HIV and AIDS in the African context as well as a description of the context in which Ezekiel was prophesying.



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