

# THE BIBLE, HIV/AIDS AND AFRICAN-SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN: A *BOSADI* (WOMANHOOD) PERSPECTIVE

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## *Abstract*

The observation that the Christian Bible has historically played an important role, either for good or for evil, in differing African contexts, be it on the continent or in the Diaspora, cannot be disputed. The reality is that the Bible continues to play a crucial role in the lives of many African Christian believers. Notwithstanding the popularity of the Bible in our contexts, its use, particularly by those in power, has not always been helpful.

As a matter of fact, in many of our church contexts, the womenfolk who come to church, overwhelmed by the pressures of everyday life, find some of our biblical interpretations more 'wounding' than healing. Yet many of our churches are mostly populated by women and girls. Statistics have shown that women, particularly those of African descent (both on the continent and in the Diaspora), are the hardest hit by the pandemic of our time: HIV/AIDS. The present text seeks to answer the following question:

How should the plight of our day, one which hits the womenfolk the most, impact on our biblical hermeneutics as scholars, theologians, pastors and laity alike, in a way that will benefit all persons, but particularly those on the margins of our societies?

## **1 HIV/AIDS, Christian Bible/African Church: Bed-fellows?**

In the year 2001, when I was driving to Pretoria with Professor Renita Weems, a scholar then visiting the Department of Old Testament at the University of South Africa, she remarked: "If there are any two texts that African American men know, even those who do not attend church, these are: Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 7." We laughed as we

marvelled at the similarities of our contexts, the African-South African and the African-American contexts – in spite of their geographical separation – in their use of the Bible, particularly to entrench patriarchy and perpetuate the subordination of women.

In Ephesians 5, the most familiar and favourite text in the African-South African context, we read: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. 24 Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also ought wives to be, in everything to their husbands.” This text is usually read through the African cultural lens to remind the listener about the God-given authority of the man as head of the family. Underlying such an understanding, although this is usually not brought to light explicitly, is the African cultural ‘given’ that men are the family ‘bulls’. Coupled with this is the African traditional notion that women cannot lead. Women are therefore to submit to the authority of their husbands unquestioningly. In our context, even men who do not attend church argue with what the author says in verse 24: “Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also ought wives to be, in everything to their husbands.”

The second text is usually cited to remind women that they must always be available for the sexual gratification of their spouses. Interesting proverbs here include: *Mosadi ke tshwene, o lewa mabogo*. A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten. Its tenor is: Every (married) woman is expected to work hard towards the family welfare and, at the same time, always be available to satisfy her husband's sexual desires (Rakoma 1971). On the other hand: *Monna ke tshwene, o ja ka matsogo a mabedi*. A man is a baboon, he eats with two hands. The idea here is that, although married, a man may have other women outside the marital relationship to satisfy his sexual needs!

One does not need to possess the exegetical and hermeneutical tools of biblical scholars to understand that what is at issue in the above readings of these texts is not, in fact, using the Bible to bless/empower one's neighbour or fellow member of the Body of Christ (the latter being the main emphasis in the text itself). God is not the main agenda of such a biblical hermeneutic. What is at issue is the abuse of power by those to whom systemic forces have given power over those whose power is not thus legitimated. What is unfortunate, and even lethal in the HIV/AIDS era in South Africa, is that such an abuse of power is played out in the Name of God. I believe that many unsuspecting women not only in African-South Africa, but also on the continent, and even in African-America, have been infected with the HI-virus as a result of, among other factors, such an unfortunate use of the Bible. Indeed, statistics have revealed that the major mode of transmission in

Sub-Saharan Africa is through heterosexual intercourse, with marriage being the major risk factor (cf Baden & Wach 1998:7). Women are usually the victims in these situations.

Given the negative impact of the colonial and apartheid forces in patriarchal African-South Africa, it becomes clear how such readings only serve to force African-South African women further to the bottom of the patriarchal ladder. And, in recent years, this had led to them being the hardest hit by the pandemic of our era: the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which usually leads to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

In the case of African-South Africa, colonialism meant that the land, the source of life, on the riches of which our ancestors subsisted, was taken away from the indigenous peoples. The latter were pushed into infertile portions of the land. Coupled with this, the small-scale agricultural efforts of African people, which normally involved the work of many women, were jeopardised by government-subsidised agricultural projects. These projects fell mostly into the hands of white, male farmers (this continues to be the case, even today). With no soil with which to make their living, poverty forced black men to become the victims of migrant labour, a factor which contributed to the disintegration of black family life. Patriarchy, both in the broader society and in the African culture, privileged men over women. It may be argued that racial oppression exacerbated the situation of black women in that, on their return home, angered by the harsh treatment from their white bosses and madams, and with their male egos inflated by the white, western form of exchange (money), black men could vent their anger on these powerless women. At the same time, patriarchy (stemming from both African culture and biblical interpretation) dictates that a woman's status as a full human being is that of a married adult: a perception which traditionally also meant that girl children received less school education than their male counterparts. It thus makes sense that many African women in South Africa are, mainly on account of systemic forces, trapped in poverty, abusive marriages and violent Biblical interpretations, thus becoming easy prey to the HI-virus.

Those of you who are conversant with the socio-political history of South Africa will agree with me that the Bible was used by black theologians, liberation theologians, biblical scholars and ecumenical organisations to challenge apartheid/state theology. We can rightly assert that, in the history of this country, a few Christian individuals, challenged by God's call to the prophetic ministry, dared to speak and challenge the powers that be, declaring that apartheid was a sin against God. These individuals were not sent by their churches to wage war against the injustices that were committed against the black

masses of South Africa. They went out on account of their sense of what it means to be a church: to be God's spokespersons on earth. The South African churches reacted differently to the repressive and evil status quo of the time. A common reaction was to succumb to the theology of the powerful without declaring this publicly. The latter is the kind of theology which taught black people to read the Bible as though they were white, reading the Bible as though the context was devoid of racial sins (Cf Masenya 1998, a reading of the Sarah/Hagar narrative; cf Mosala's materialist reading, 1989). Ours was a theology which trained women to read the Bible as though they were men, and taught the poor to read the Bible as though they were rich (cf the favorite text describing the Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31:10-31; Masenya 2004). Many Bible readers ended up owning only a hermeneutic of the powerful without enjoying the material benefits enjoyed by those whom their race and class allowed to be on top. The poor and marginalised were promised spiritual benefits in the world to come, while the powerful themselves were already enjoying the earthly blessings of the land in the here and now, largely in the form of gold.

In the light of this history of South African biblical hermeneutics, it therefore makes sense that the South African church can now read the Bible, in the time of HIV/AIDS, as though it is 'business-as-usual'.

Both the church and the theological academy continue to do just this, despite the alarming statistics of HIV infections and the many deaths caused by opportunistic diseases linked with AIDS.

In 2003, it was reported that South Africa is losing 600 persons to AIDS every day.

It is in the light of this history, of the important role which the Bible has played in the history of South Africa, and informed also by my call to ministry as a teacher of the Word, and my commitment to justice, that I have used the same Bible, and continue to do so, to challenge patriarchy in my context and, in the process, embark on an HIV/AIDS sensitive *bosadi* (womanhood) biblical hermeneutics. Such an undertaking is motivated by the painful reality that the South African church, and religious leaders in particular, to a great extent do theology as though they are not burying people at a frightening rate. Just as the church preferred for the most part, to take a comfortable position during the apartheid era, even when many South African blacks lost their lives due to the brutality of the apartheid system, even now the South African church, on the whole, prefers to take a low profile over the horror of AIDS.

Having said this, it should not be assumed that there are no churches, religious organisations or individual Christians who are actively involved

in the fight against HIV/AIDS. There are a few who are committed in their efforts to reaching out to the many excluded, stigmatised sufferers of this disease. However, given the influential role which the Christian church has played in South African history and the role which the Bible was made to play and continues to play as a norm in the lives of believers and, moreover, given the mission of the church to bring life in the midst of death, hope to the hopeless, care to the needy, healing to the sick, the church should definitely do much more.

To the above question concerning whether 'HIV/AIDS and the African Church (Christian Bible) can be bedfellows', we respond by a resounding yes for the following reasons:

- The Bible presents God as the Giver of life. The creation of all life is attributed to God (Gn1-2). In the Second Testament, Jesus Christ is presented as One who came to give life to every one who believed in the message of the cross (Jn 3:16; 10:10). As God's messenger, the church should thus 'love life' This should be made manifest not only in the churches' proclamations or teachings on Sundays. It must also be reflected in the Church's willingness to face the life-denying monster of the present era, HIV/AIDS, head on. The church should find an irony in denying life to those people who have been blessed with the role of bringing life to earth, its womenfolk.
- As a caring community, the church ought to provide a space for healing to those who have been wounded. Indeed in the words of Christ, those who are healthy have no need for a doctor. As the Healer of the broken-hearted, the physically weak, the physically challenged, the emotionally-wounded, Jesus Christ ministered to those who needed support the most. Given the observation that the Christian church has been very judgmental in its approach to AIDS sufferers, and has therefore only helped to deepen the existing wounds of those infected and affected, the church could do well to reconsider its mission as one of building up and not breaking down, healing and not hurting. Because a human being is only a human being because of other human beings, AIDS victims cannot heal in isolation. They need to be affirmed and accommodated by the community. The words of Allen (as quoted by Emilie Townes regarding the African-American communities) are worthy of note:

One of the greatest causes of failure in the church's health and healing ministry is the positioning of congregations as theatres instead of healing communities. Chapels with platforms as stages for the clergy and robed choirs to perform are too often the order of the day than are organic communities where each person is as important as the other

and each has a friend. We cannot heal in isolation. We need others. (Townes 1998:174)

- In the face of HIV/AIDS, the church is challenged to bring into the open burning issues which hitherto have been regarded as taboos. In African cultures, issues pertaining to human sexuality have been regarded as matters belonging to the private sphere of the home. In patriarchal cultures, as one could expect, if such matters are discussed, particularly in heterosexual contexts, the preoccupation is on how males can benefit. The control of women's sexuality, sanctioned by not only the African cultures, patriarchy as espoused by the broader society and the media, but also by women-unfriendly biblical interpretations, continues to be the order of the day (cf the interpretation of the text of 1 Cor 7 above). Many women in such contexts feel helpless in attempting to negotiate safe sex with their partners (cf Townes 1998). Topics such as the use of drugs, the use of condoms, and homosexuality need to be brought into the open and discussed in a more frank and balanced way (cf Douglas 1999). One thing for sure is that, even if in earlier days, particularly in African-American context, HIV/AIDS was designated as: a 'gay' disease, or the fate of those who used intravenous drugs, or a punishment for 'prostitutes', or God's punishment for adulterers, which meant that the church could feel justified in ignoring the intensity of the situation, today the rate of infection among heterosexuals, particularly females between the ages 25 and 44 (Douglas 1999:3) is increasing alarmingly. The latter statistic is an indication that HIV/AIDS is with us and in us. And, indeed, in many an instance, due to these negative stereotypes associated with HIV/AIDS, many of us have infected, even as we continue to infect, others, unknowingly, since the belief is that HIV/AIDS is 'somebody else's' disease. The church needs to provide a safe space for people to speak freely about their bodies. There is therefore a need for a liberating theology of the body to balance the 'theology of the spirit' in which the church has been soaked for so long.

## 2 Challenging androcentric biblical hermeneutics

Research has shown that the HI-virus thrives among the weak, the poor, the less educated, blacks, women. It is not surprising, therefore that, in many contexts, women of African descent, whether on the continent or in the Diaspora, are the hardest hit by the pandemic of the present time. It is therefore the responsibility of the church to challenge patriarchy and related forces: racism, classism, HIV/AIDS, etc by providing their faith communities with-life giving biblical interpretations. The male-oriented interpretation of the texts quoted at the beginning

of this lecture leaves its readers with the idolisation of the male gender. Elsewhere I have argued as follows:

... Such idolization cannot do women any good, particularly given our HIV/AIDS contexts. The church should also critically revisit the androcentric interpretations of the bible since these interpretations have contributed to the perpetuation of the view that the female is inferior, and that the latter is God-ordained. Such a view has enabled dangerous cultural sayings, reinforced by apparently similar sayings from the Bible, to be applied indiscriminately to powerless girl children and women. (Masenya 2003:125)

Cheryl Anderson (2003:39), an African-American professor at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, argues:

Because of the shocking statistics on the impact of the virus on our community's women and children, as well as our men, we must reconsider the 'boundaries' of our community and incorporate those who have all too often been excluded from our mainstream concerns. The HIV/AIDS pandemic means that we need to read the Bible in new ways as we begin to think of ourselves as a community in new ways.

In an attempt to challenge patriarchy in the African-South African context, I have developed the *Bosadi* (womanhood) approach to the reading of biblical texts.

The Northern Sotho word *bosadi* (womanhood) is an abstract noun which comes from the word *mosadi*. Ziervogel and Mokgokong define the word *mosadi* as meaning 'woman', 'married woman', 'wife'. The word *mosadi* comes from the root *-sadi* which has to do with womanhood; *bosadi* for example may be translated as 'womanhood' or 'private parts of a woman' (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:1154). The word *mosadi* also occurs, though in different but related words, in other African-South African languages: *wansati* (Xitsonga), *umfazi* (Zulu/Xhosa), *musadzi* (TshiVenda), *mosadi* (Tswana), a fact revealing the resemblances between the different African ethnic groups in this country (Masenya 2004:122 ).

The *bosadi* approach was necessitated by my commitment to take seriously, the unique experiences of African women in South Africa as they interact with the Christian Bible. The contexts of these women, just like those of women in the different African contexts, are typified by a variety of life-denying factors: classism (poverty), post-apartheid racism /neo-racism, gender inequalities (both in the African culture and in the broader South African society), ethnicity, HIV/AIDS – to name but five.

Noting that biblical studies in South Africa and elsewhere on the African continent, and in the Diaspora, has been the preserve of white males, the *bosadi* approach is an attempt to make Africa, and its unique context, a force to reckon with. Africa and its varied contexts needs to be interrogated by an African female person, and informed by the varied experiences of women in Africa, particularly African-South Africa.

The approach acknowledges the significant role which the Bible continues to play as a spiritual resource in the lives of many African women in South Africa. The faith of these women is thus taken into account in their interaction with the Bible. The Bible is used as a weapon against life-denying forces in the lives of African peoples. The life-denying elements of the Bible, as well as those in African culture, need to be challenged and resisted. In the same way, the life-giving elements in both texts must be embraced and used for the good of those on the margins of our African communities, particularly women.

In the following lines, we will give an example of how the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible can be approached from a *bosadi* perspective.

A traditional reading of the story in my context will take the following pattern, more or less:

The story of Ruth is the story of God's faithfulness to the promises of God regarding the king stemming from the Davidic lineage. To this end, as the Almighty, God makes a way where there was none. When there is no son to carry on the line of Elimelech, God provides the son to Naomi in a mysterious and affirming way, through her faithful Moabite, non-Israelite daughter-in-law, Ruth. The latter is crowned for her acts of kindness towards her mother-in-law by gaining security through her marriage with Boaz. Ruth thus ultimately becomes the great-grandmother of David. Following the English and Latin translations, the book's position in the canon (between the books of first and second Samuel and Judges) would fit such a reading of the book.

In our churches, the Book of Ruth could then be used to affirm that, since God is no respecter of persons, God uses a non-Israelite woman, Ruth, who, on account of her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, her willingness to forsake her country and her gods, intentionally decided to cling to Yahweh. Indeed in Ruth 2:12, Boaz remarks: "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!"

Read through the African cultural lens, the book might be found to affirm those who choose to cling to traditional expectations of ideal

womanhood in a family context. In their reading, Ruth is affirmed as a good daughter-in-law who understands that the death of her husband is not supposed to release her from her family. It is no wonder that God ultimately blesses her with another marriage and, as a bonus, with a son! God rewards the faithful. Kanyoro is concerned that such a cultural reading of the text puts no responsibility on males but underscores the expectation that it is women who ought to be good. She remarks:

African theologians who subscribe to a theology of inculturation would tend to wholeheartedly affirm cultural issues in Ruth. They applaud Ruth for faithfulness to her mother-in-law and they consider it normal that Elimelech's relative Boaz should care for Naomi and Ruth ... They glorify the fact that Ruth gave birth to a son and it is almost seen as the emblem of her true womanhood and the key to her acceptance in her foreign land among the family of her dead husband. They pronounce all cultural practices in Ruth as normal and good and recommend them for emulation by African women. (Kanyoro 2002:36).

Let us now take a brief look at the *Bosadi* (womanhood) reading of the Book of Ruth.

### 3 Rereading the Book of Ruth, the *Bosadi* Way

The point of departure in the use of this methodology comprises the experiences of African-South African women as women who are at the bottom of the patriarchal ladder, and questions such as the following will be asked:

Does a biblical book which bears the name of a woman necessarily affirm that female character? How are female characters used in the text? Are they used as a means to an end or do they serve as ends in themselves? Which ideologies surface as one reads the Book of Ruth? How harmful may these be to the wellbeing of those African-South African women who, though they are committed to the African communal mentality, still seek affirmation as individual human beings created in the image of God?

If read through the African cultural lens, which images of ideal womanhood (*bosadi*) emerge? If these images are similar to those promoted by our African contexts (communities and churches), how affirming and life-giving are these to women? Should women readers of such images embrace them indiscriminately, irrespective of the

repercussions these notions might have on them? This question is particularly pertinent in view of the HIV/AIDS infested-contexts in which we live. Some of the images of ideal womanhood revealed as one rereads the book through the *bosadi* lens include:

- The fact that ideal womanhood equals being a married woman: a woman must thus seek marriage at all costs (cf Ruth's daring move to visit the male sphere in the night!). A powerless person (a widowed, poor, non-Israelite woman) makes her body available to a rich, Israelite man. Commentators are agreed that the language used by the narrator to describe the encounter between Ruth and Naomi on the threshing floor is ambiguous. Despite the ambivalence, the text persuades the modern reader, particularly one who is conscious about the ravaging effects of the HI virus, to suspect that there was a sexual encounter between the two (cf Masenya 2004). If that was the case, how may an uncritical reading of this text impact on those women readers who seek marriage at all costs, even at the cost of offering their bodies to men? How may the text be re-read by those poor African-South African women whom poverty has forced into prostitution?
- Once married, a worthy woman (*esheyet hayil*) must know that: *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, a (married) woman's grave is at her husband's place. Ruth's move, to cling to a widowed mother-in-law, makes sense in such a cultural context. Should modern users of such proverbs use them at all costs? What implications might such proverbs have, particularly in the HIV/AIDS context, in relation to the practice of widow inheritance still existing in other African contexts? Such proverbs encourage women to persevere in and through abusive marriages. Given the idolisation of marriage in our contexts, many women will persevere in marriage with unfaithful partners who continue to have a hold on their sexuality. Should women continue to consign themselves to death knowingly in the name of marriage? Could women be allowed to have a voice in such settings, even though marriage is understood in communal terms? Could women who choose not to be married be affirmed?
- In marriage, an ideal woman is one who gives birth to children, but particularly sons.

The *bosadi* approach acknowledges that, even in post-apartheid South Africa (footnote), definitions of ideal womanhood, as dictated by the African traditional cultures, still hold water. As a *mosadi* biblical scholar, I acknowledge that there are African women who deliberately choose to play the role of both wife and mother. I also note that, given the context of today, a context which was created mainly by colonialism and apartheid, many African women might choose to

operate from both the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of work. I am also aware that, on account of these same systemic forces, including patriarchy, there are many African women who, even if they go to the 'public' sphere of work, end up doing domestic work. Could we then look down upon these people on account of the 'nature of the work' which they do, although it is in the public sphere? There is a need, particularly for middle-class women, to guard against absolutising the 'public sphere' of work and thus using the master's definitions of what ideal womanhood should be for all women, as though a black woman's experience is universal. We also need to guard against imposing our definitions of what ideal womanhood is on those who are less privileged than we are. Having said this, we must also challenge those who understand that ideal womanhood means *only* attachment to a man in marriage and confinement to the private sphere of the home.

At the same time, there are women who might choose to lead single lives. There will be some, particularly among the younger generation, who might choose to lead child- and sonless lives.

In my rereading of the Book of Ruth, I would argue that whatever reading will be found to affirm the dignity of an African woman as a person in her own right, apart from men, children, society – a reading which will affirm her in her carrying out of her individual purpose as ordained by God – is to be welcomed. Such a reading will be life-giving in that it will not make her, and the African girl child, vulnerable to the HI-virus.

## 4 Conclusion

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has thrown the church into a moment of crisis, a moment when many persons, whether knowingly or unknowingly, die in front of our eyes. Can the church afford to remain asleep in this dangerous moment? A moment when it must be compelled to raise its prophetic voice against the injustices done to (female) humanity? No! This is the moment to proclaim that God's mind is geared to giving life to a sick and dying nation. This is the moment to heed the call: 'Let the Church be the Church!'

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## ENDNOTE