

Towards an Ethical Reading of the Hebrew Bible in the Fight against HIV and AIDS

**MADIPOANE MASENYA (NGWAN'A MPHAHLELE) (UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH AFRICA) AND LEHLOHONOLO BOOKHOLANE (UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH AFRICA)**

ABSTRACT

The high rates of prevalence of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in the African continent in general, and in the Southern African region in particular, has rightfully attracted the attention of scholars across various disciplines, including a few of the Hebrew Bible (HB) scholars in South Africa. Some have responded to the discourse of the relationship between HIV and AIDS and the HB by making claims that the HB is a source of moral values. Some explore whether it may reveal something about the pandemic, while others investigate whether the HB engenders stigma against the affected and infected. The scholars' response (or lack thereof) to this discourse depends largely, in the first place, on the type of questions they pose, their attitude to the biblical narrative in general and secondly, the main text(s) of their investigation in particular. They employ basically two approaches in their hermeneutical and exegetical efforts. Firstly, there is an option for what may be called "alternative readings." Secondly, there are readings aimed at providing deconstructions of specific HB texts. In this article, we propose that the link between the pandemic of HIV and AIDS and the HB could be better resolved by taking a closer look at the literary narrative constructions themselves, identifying as many ideologies as possible in our quest for a more holistic ethical reading of the HB in the context of HIV and AIDS.

A INTRODUCTION

In this article, we propose that the link between the pandemic of HIV and AIDS and the Hebrew Bible (HB) could be better resolved by taking a closer look at the literary narrative constructions, thus complementing the exercise of narrative deconstruction with a conscious act of textual reconstruction. In particular, we seek to examine as many ideologies as we can identify within the text in our attempt to do justice to an HIV and AIDS sensitive biblical hermeneutic. We long for such a hermeneutic in our efforts to read the Hebrew Bible ethically within the HIV and AIDS context. As a point of departure, we interrogate a sermon with the claim on the HIV-positive status of Jesus. We question the ethics of such a reading and in particular, its impact on the campaign to fight HIV and AIDS. We then revisit the works of three South African Hebrew Bible scholars in their attempt to re-read the book of Job through an HIV and

AIDS sensitive lens. Although we are appreciative of their commitment to integrate the HIV and AIDS discourse in their biblical hermeneutics, we are of the opinion that more justice could have been done to their readings of Job if additional ideologies could have been identified and challenged. In an attempt to come up with a more holistic HIV and AIDS-conscious reading of the Hebrew Bible, we chose rather not to engage the book of Job as they did but to interrogate two biblical characters, Vashti (Esther 1) in the present article (and Dinah [Gen 34] in a later article). Due to our engagement with as many ideologies as possible both in the Esther text and in the Bible readers' context, we hope to come up with a more ethical reading of (at least a part of) the Hebrew Bible in the context of HIV and AIDS.

B A CONTROVERSIAL SERMON

The recent widely reported sermon in the national and international media entitled "Jesus was HIV positive"¹ provides an interesting and insightful case for the purposes of our investigation. The sermon was preached in a particular South African locality. Those unable to listen to the sermon could only read its coverage from the perspectives of the journalists who obviously had vested ideological² interests on how they narrate stories so that they may continue to live in the memory of the public.

In this article, we engage the version of the sermon that appeared in the *Pretoria News* of Monday 6 September 2010. Other media houses such as The Guardian, Sowetanlive, Mail&Guardian, City Press, News24, IOL and Timeslive, also reported on the sermon. The captions under which the sermon appeared in the respective newspapers display not only a strong interest in the HIV and AIDS discourse in general, but also the churches' responses to the pandemic in particular. We have chosen to engage the media reports on this sermon firstly because of the nature of public discourse as reflected by the media; secondly, because of the light thrown on the pertinent issues in the scholarly debates on HIV and AIDS in general, and thirdly, because of the manner in which the HB and the Christian Scriptures are appropriated in the fight against HIV and AIDS. We hope to contribute to this debate and break the silence and stigma around HIV infections.

The congregation to which the preacher delivered his message is defined

¹ Udani Samarasekera, "'Jesus had HIV' draws backlash, world hype," *Pretoria News* (September 6, 2010): 3.

² Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "'For Better or for Worse?'—the (Christian) Bible and African Women," *Old Testament Essays* 22/1 (2009): 126-150 examines the intersection between ideology, power and African women's experiences and argue that the act of interpretation of texts is never value-free as readers bring their biases into the act of reading.

as the non-denominational³ and charismatic⁴ *Way of Life Church* in Khayelitsha. We wonder whether, by labelling the constituency as charismatic,⁵ the media is in essence not affirming⁶ the leader's charisma. Or should we rather think that the authority, by which he is making the claim on the HIV status of Jesus, is one of charisma?

The preacher's self-awareness of his influence in the community and his personal history of having lost two sisters to the pandemic appear to have informed his intention: "The aim was not to start an international dialogue but to create a dialogue in Khayelitsha, which has huge rates of HIV/Aids."⁷ The media reported on "huge rates" of HIV/AIDS "infections" and failed to cover the current discourse in communities with small rates of infection. Reporting on both kinds of discourses will certainly contribute tremendously towards breaking the silence and stigma surrounding the pandemic. Elsewhere in the sermon, the preacher makes the following theological statements:

God is on the side of the destitute, marginalised and poor. He's [sic] not out to judge or victimise people.

In many parts of the Bible, God puts Himself [sic] in the position of the destitute, the sick, the marginalized...

When we attend to those who are sick, we are attending to Him.
When we ignore people who are sick, we are ignoring Him.⁸

It is one thing to make the above-mentioned theological statements but quite another to make a claim that "Jesus Christ was HIV-positive."⁹ It is worth

³ Samarasekera, "Jesus had HIV," 3. David Smith, "Pastor's 'Jesus had HIV' sermon angers South African Christians." n.p. [cited 25 August 2010]. Online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/25/pastor-jesus-hiv-south-africa/print>;

⁴ SAPA, "Jesus was HIV-positive, claims pastor," n.p. [cited 3 September 2010]. Online: http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=nw20100903115234677C986636

⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an outline of interpretive sociology* (ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 241-254. We use the notion of charisma in the Weberian sense i.e. the legitimising of authority by means of charisma; this technical meaning is helpful in the examination of the preacher's claim on Jesus' HIV status and the authority of such a claim in the ethical appropriation of biblical texts.

⁶ Teresia M. Hinga, "AIDS, Religion and Women in Africa: Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," in *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges* (ed. Teresia M. Hinga, Anne N. Kubai, Philomena N. Mwaura, Hazel Ayanga; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008), 91-93.

⁷ Samarasekera, "Jesus had HIV," 3.

⁸ Samarasekera, "Jesus had HIV," 3.

⁹ Samarasekera, "Jesus had HIV," 3.

remembering that this is not the first time that we have heard similar statements although these were made in the collective. Some mainline congregations and the ecumenical movement have argued that the church as the body of Christ was HIV-positive.¹⁰ The observation that such statements have been made before, makes them neither acceptable nor appropriate. This is especially the case when the intention for such utterances was to motivate people to undergo voluntary HIV testing. People in general, and one's congregants in particular, could still be encouraged to undergo such tests without problematic claims on Jesus' HIV status and the dire consequences. What concerns us more, is the impact of such claims on the gains made through the public campaigns to highlight the systemic and structural nature of HIV and AIDS and the impact such sermons will have in order to personalise, individualise and internalise what is essentially and naturally a public matter.¹¹

Dare we also note that God chooses a preferential option for the infected and affected? In our view, one of the reasons for the existence of the church as the body of Christ is to be in solidarity with the disenfranchised, including the infected and affected. Such a view though, does not address the question of why the preference for the alleviation of the plight of the marginalised is invariably elevated to God and not to human beings, of whom some are responsible for the structural designs that create and perpetuate such miserable conditions. To make matters worse, in many an instance, the victims and the survivors and/or their communities are expected to become agents towards the alleviation of their plight even as they continue to bear the consequences of the failed processes of justice, peace and reconciliation. An important question we ask is: Will there come a moment when the perpetrators and beneficiaries of this theological and social burden lead by example towards its alleviation?

As the preacher further engages with the responses to his sermon, he reveals the negative responses to the claim that "Jesus was HIV positive when he says: "It tells us how people view HIV: that it is a sexual promiscuity thing."¹² We could not disagree with him more. In our view, a disassociation of HIV from sexual promiscuity can still be effected without making the claim

¹⁰ Denise Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry: Re-Reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV and AIDS Pandemic," in *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications/Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2004), 27-59. Letty M. Russell, ed. *The Church with AIDS: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 147-8.

¹¹ Beverley Haddad, "Faith resources and sites as critical to participatory learning with rural South African women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22/1 (2006): 135-154.

¹² Samarasekera, "Jesus had HIV," 3.

that "*Jesus was HIV-positive.*"¹³ In fact, the preacher will do well to remember that the church's initial response was complicit to associate HIV with promiscuity.¹⁴ The churches gave the impression that this association is the only message to be conveyed about the pandemic. This reminds us of pregnancies which the Church usually connects with nothing but fornication and promiscuity among others. It appears that it never dawns on the church to pause and think that the pregnancy may have been not the result of consent but of statutory rape;¹⁵ that it might have happened owing to the first and only sexually abusive encounter. Also, society and the Church always focus on "pregnancy" of the woman and girl-child and never on the father who sired the child.

Notwithstanding the fact that one's theological presuppositions determine one's position, sexual promiscuity may not just be dismissed lightly, at least if we wish to adopt a holistic approach in the intervention against the pandemic and contribution towards an ethical appropriation of the HB in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

The sermon touches on the need to break the silence about one's HIV status: "The message people are sending is that people with HIV must go to a silent death, even if they are a woman whose husband has been unfaithful, a baby who was born with HIV or a woman who was raped," The alleged con-

¹³ Samarasekera, "Jesus had HIV," 3; Sarojini Nadar, "Barak God and Die! Women, HIV and a Theology of Suffering," in *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications / Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2004), 60-79.

¹⁴ Ezra Chitando and Masiwa Ragies Gunda, "HIV and AIDS, stigma and liberation in the Old Testament," *Exchange* 36/2 (2007): 184-197; Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 77-80.

¹⁵ Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007 (Act No.32 of 2007); We use the term "statutory rape" as defined in the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007 (Act No.32 of 2007) section 15 (1) and 16 (1). According to section (1) "child" means - (a) a person under the age of 18 years; or (b) with reference to sections 15 and 16, a person 12 years or older but under the age of 16 years. For a helpful discussion on the subject of rape within an HIV and AIDS discourse in the context of the Hebrew Bible, see the articles by Denise M. Ackermann, "'Deep in the Flesh' Women, Bodies and HIV/AIDS: A Feminist Ethical Perspective," Pages 105-125 in *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges*. Edited by Teresia M. Hinga, Anne N. Kubai, Philomena N. Mwaura and Hazel Ayanga. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008. Denise M. Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 32. Hazel Ayanga, "Religio-Cultural Challenges in Women's Fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa," in *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges* (ed. Teresia M. Hinga, Anne N. Kubai, Philomena N. Mwaura, and Hazel Ayanga. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008), 34-48. Nadar, "Toward a feminist missiological agenda," 91, 98.

spiracy of silence¹⁶ and the culture of silence¹⁷ around one's HIV status and that of the church members' could still be broken without making the claim that "Jesus was HIV-positive." Worth noting however, is that although the "silence" on living with the virus is usually fore-grounded, other silences are glaringly conspicuous. Examples include the veil of silence placed on how the virus was acquired,¹⁸ the silence of the church,¹⁹ the impact of the pandemic on other racial groups in South Africa, and the silence of academia. In our view, such disclosures, among others, could help readers in their commitment to an ethical appropriation of the sacred texts in general, and the HB in particular in the fight against the pandemic.

In our view, the preacher's efforts to engage the HIV and AIDS discourse in his God-talk should be welcomed due to the general silence within the context of many a South African community of faith in general and the academia in particular regarding HIV and AIDS.

As already stressed in the preceding analysis, what we find questionable in his sermon though, is the way in which Jesus, an important sacred figure of Christianity, is integrated; something that touches on the ethics of how we interact with sacred texts. Our main concern with a sermon that seeks to encourage activism around the pandemic of HIV and AIDS by claiming that Jesus was HIV-positive is that it can only defeat the mission to which it seeks to be committed. In our view, such a claim can only do harm to the campaign for abstinence, faithfulness and the use of condoms; because if Jesus himself could be positive, who am I not to be, a believer on the ground may ask.

Noteworthy is the observation of the following issues which emerge from the sermon and are pertinent to the discourse of HIV and AIDS—issues, we may add, which have previously received the attention of some biblical scholars and theologians: sexuality,²⁰ sexual promiscuity,²¹ silence,²² stigma,²³

¹⁶ Khathide, Agrippa G. "Teaching and Talking about Our Sexuality: A Means of Combating HIV/AIDS," in *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes* (ed. Musa W. Dube. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), 1-9.

¹⁷ Ayanga, "Women's Fight against HIV/AIDS," 41-42.

¹⁸ Chitando & Gunda "HIV and AIDS, Stigma," 195.

¹⁹ Haddad, "A Deadly Silence in the Church," 97-98.

²⁰ Beverley Haddad, "Reflections on the Church and HIV/AIDS," *Theology Today* 62/1 (April 2005): 29-37. Khathide, "Teaching and Talking about Our Sexuality," 6-7. Chitando and Gunda, "HIV and AIDS, Stigma," 191. Ayanga, "Women's Fight against HIV/AIDS," 38-41; Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 84-87. D. Ackermann, "Deep in the Flesh," 118-120.

²¹ Nadar, "Barak God and Die!" 61. Nadar, "Toward a feminist missiological agenda," 91. Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 77. Essamuah, "Review of Donald E. Messer," 242. Ezra Chitando and Lovemore Togarasei, "'Woman, Where are They?' John 7:53-8:11 and Stigma in the Context of HIV and

rape,²⁴ theological assumptions,²⁵ gender,²⁶ social class,²⁷ and race/ethnicity,²⁸ xenophobia,²⁹ structural and systemic factors,³⁰ the integration of these with the biblical text in question, is not always sufficiently done.

In this article, we are thus arguing that in order to do justice to the discourse of HIV and AIDS, the focus should not only be on the individual sufferers as it appears to be the case in the preceding sermon as well as in some of the scholarly readings, but also on the multi-faceted nature of Bible readers'

AIDS." *Missionalia* 36/1 (April 2008): 4-15.

²² Khathide, "Teaching and Talking about Our Sexuality," 1-2. Ayanga, "Women's Fight against HIV/AIDS," 41. Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 88. Haddad, "A Deadly Silence in the Church," 98-100. Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "The Challenge of HIV/AIDS for Theological Education in Africa: Towards an HIV/AIDS Sensitive Curriculum," *Missionalia* 29/2 (2001): 125-143. Masenya, "Between Unjust Suffering and the "silent" God: Job and HIV/AIDS Sufferers in South Africa," *Missionalia*, 29/2 (2001): 186-199. Genevieve L. James. "Tell It Like It Is! The Case to Include the Story of the Rape of Tamar in Children's Bibles as an Awareness Tool," *Journal for Semitics* 16/2 (2007): 312-322.

²³ Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 77-80. Chitando and Gunda, "HIV and AIDS, Stigma" 186-197. Johanna Stiebert, "Does the Hebrew Bible have anything to tell us about HIV/AIDS?" *Missionalia* 29/2 (2001):174-185. Ackermann, "'Deep in the Flesh'," 117-118.

²⁴ Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007 (Act No. 32 of 2007); see also Ackermann, "'Deep in the Flesh'," 108-9; Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 33-35; Ayanga, "Women's Fight against HIV/AIDS," 40-41; Nadar, "Toward a feminist missiological agenda," 95-99.

²⁵ Essamuah, "Review of Donald E. Messer," 242 and Chitando and Gunda "HIV and AIDS, Stigma," 193.

²⁶ Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 35-39. Philomena N. Mwaura, "Violation of Human Rights of Kenyan Women with HIV/AIDS through Stigma and Discrimination," in *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges* (ed. Teresia M. Hinga, Anne N. Kubai, Philomena N. Mwaura and Hazel Ayanga. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008), 126-134. Beverley Haddad, "Constructing Theologies of Survival in the South African Context: The Necessity of a Critical Engagement Between Postmodern and Liberation Theology," *Journal of Feminist Theology in Religion* 14/2 (1998): 5-18. Beverley Haddad, "Theologising Development: A Gendered Analysis of Poverty, Survival and Faith," *JTSA* 110 (2001): 5-19. Haddad, "A Deadly Silence in the Church," 95-97.

²⁷ Musa W. Dube, "Introduction: Towards Multi-sectoral Teaching in a Time of HIV/AIDS," in *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), vii-xiii. Chitando and Gunda, "HIV and AIDS, Stigma," 191, 195

²⁸ Chitando and Gunda, "HIV and AIDS, Stigma," 191. Ayanga, "Women's Fight against HIV/AIDS," 34. Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 79-80.

²⁹ Chitando and Gunda, "HIV and AIDS, Stigma," 190.

³⁰ Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 29-31. Ackermann, "Deep in the Flesh," 107-109. Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 86.

contexts as well as on the multiple ideologies that are present in these biblical texts. An "ethical" reading for us therefore refers to a reading of the text that does not highlight only one ideology, for example the social class status of a biblical character or of a Bible reader by downplaying or even denying other ideologies. These ideologies, if left untouched, may lead to a reading which does not do sufficient justice to our fight against HIV and AIDS. We intend to use the Vashti text in the HB in our attempt to be more holistic in terms of identifying as many ideologies as possible in our efforts to read the HB more ethically in the context of HIV and AIDS.

As stated in the introduction, we have elected to revisit the works of three South African Hebrew Bible scholars whose focus was on an HIV and AIDS-conscious reading of a particular HB book, the book of Job. To our knowledge, these are the South African HB scholars who have engaged this particular HB text through an HIV and AIDS sensitive lens. They might have read other biblical texts with an HIV and AIDS agenda, however, what attracted us to their works here below, is their commonality on the particular HB text read and in particular, their employment of an HIV and AIDS sensitive hermeneutic to engage the book. These scholars' works will hopefully assist us in our reading of Vashti on the following grounds:

Firstly they have provided examples of HIV and AIDS sensitive biblical hermeneutics and secondly, they have identified certain ideologies at play both within the text and within particular interpretive contexts, an exercise that we will attempt in our reading of the Vashti section in the present article.

C REVISITING WORKS BY SOME SOUTH AFRICAN HEBREW BIBLE SCHOLARS

Firstly, we take a look at Nadar's gender HIV and AIDS sensitive approach to the book of Job.

1 Sarojini Nadar

In her attempt to read the book of Job from the viewpoint of a woman, Nadar argues that it is Job's wife's solitary statement that impacts the theological debate between Job and his friends in the following chapters, that is, chapters 3-37. Job's wife argues: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." Nadar's important argument, which would have foregrounded the female voice, that is, the voice of Job's wife, is not sustained throughout the text of her chapter, that despite the fact of the feminine face of the pandemic of HIV and AIDS as well as the nature of the book in which her article is included. Despite her initial intentions, and the title of her paper, which appears to have been geared at elevating the feminine experience, she instead, "slip" into a discussion of the problematic notion of retributive justice, basically from the perspective of Job, the "poor"/"impoverished" man, perhaps because of the

nature of the androcentric and, dare we say, misogynistic text with which she grapples.

Nadar spends the better part of her engagement with the book of Job by reading it from the perspective of the poor. She does this by problematising the sources of authority which inform the views of Job and his friends. She should however be lauded for introducing the topic of poverty as an important category in her commitment to doing justice to the discourse of HIV and AIDS in her hermeneutical efforts. She argues that the reason why Job can now have an appreciation of the poor and their plight is because he, unlike his friends, was then poor:

In other words, it is only because he himself suffers 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 the braai in affluent circles in South Africa. The conversations that centre around "common sense observations" such as "African people are by nature more promiscuous." Common sense observations!³¹

Choosing to keep the ambivalence of the meaning of *barak* (bless or curse), Nadar argues that the main point driven home by the book of Job, is its provision to the modern day sufferer/reader, including those who suffer on account of the pandemic of HIV and AIDS, regarding how not to talk about God. She asserts:

In fact I believe that God does not provide any significant answer as to how we should talk about God in times of suffering. What God shows both Job and his friends is how we should not talk about God in times of suffering. Job's friends were stuck in dualistic categories of punishment and reward. Job himself was stuck in these dualistic categories of punishment and reward...Job has caught a glimpse of a non-dualistic God, and that should be the beginning of the way in which the suffering should begin to talk about God.³²

Reading through her work, a reader gets the sense that the author is aware of the complexities and/or various categories that need to be taken into account in our engagement with the HIV and AIDS discourse within our God talk. However, these categories, as we have hopefully shown, are not always addressed sufficiently by her work. Her article could have benefited from not only foregrounding the issue of poverty in the life of the individual Job, but also, from situating the structural injustices that were perpetrated on the poor of the time by the rich, a situation that also led to the rich insiders in terms of ethnicity (cf. the scepticism in Qoheleth) being plundered socio-economically by

³¹ Nadar, "Barak God and Die!" 71.

³² Nadar, "Barak God and Die!" 76.

those of their own kind.³³ The impact of the Persian Empire and its monetary/tax demands on the colonial subjects were felt more during times of drought or depression when a decline in market prices (as in the early post-exilic period) took place.³⁴

In particular, the small farmers and their families received the short end of the stick. According to Ceresco, "many were obliged to go into debt and mortgage their property. Some were even reduced to selling themselves and/or their children into foreign slavery to pay off their debts (cf. Neh 5:1-5)."³⁵

Inspired by greed, some of the wealthy Jews exploited the moment by charging more interest even as they were ready to foreclose on the mortgages as soon as such opportunities were available. It is heartening to note though, that some of these rich land-owners refused to succumb to the temptation to greed because they chose to adhere to the covenant ideals (cf. Neh 5:10-11). Regrettably, as these wealthy pious Jews refused to succumb to the cruel logic of the new Persian economic regime, they became susceptible to the danger of economic loss. It is possible that some of these may have suffered bankruptcy and economic disaster due to their piety and commitment to covenant ideals. Says Ceresco: "We could imagine one such figure as a model for the protagonist of the book of Job."³⁶ It makes sense that questions about theodicy, in such circumstances, would have been asked where people (the Jobs?) who dared to follow God's covenant demands suffered while the unjust prospered.

Even if the context of production were to be placed during the monarchic period,³⁷ the modern reader of the story would still have an appreciation for what might be perceived at face value as the suffering of (a) particular individual(s), or a particular continent, being rooted in an unjust system, pretty much the same as with the pandemic of HIV and AIDS. Wittenberg's analysis of the change in the experiences of the peasant farmers on account of the injustices that were perpetuated by the monarchy points in that direction.³⁸

In this regard, West says:

While security brought with it invasions by providing a standing army, the king, his court and the army all had to eat, and they were not producers. So, as Samuel warns the people in 1 Samuel 8 when they come to him to ask for a king to govern them "like other

³³ Anthony R. Ceresco, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality of Liberation* (Orbis: Maryknoll, 2005) 26-28.

³⁴ Ceresco, "A Spirituality of Liberation," 68.

³⁵ Ceresco, "A Spirituality of Liberation," 28.

³⁶ Ceresco, "A Spirituality of Liberation," 70.

³⁷ G. H. Wittenberg, "Job the farmer: The Judaeian am-harets and the wisdom movement." *Old Testament Essays* 4 (1991):151-170.

³⁸ Wittenberg, "Job the farmer," 151-170.

nations," the centralized monarchic state must extract food and labour in the form of tribute and taxes from those living on the land. Now it is no longer true that what you sow you reap!...In other words the experience of ordinary people living on the land is no longer the same as it was; it was now possible to work diligently and hard and still not live well because your resources are being taken by the centralised monarchic state to sustain itself.³⁹

In our view, bringing arguments like those offered by Ceresko and West to bear on her poverty-sensitive analysis of Job would then enable Nadar to situate the challenge of HIV and AIDS within a poverty-stricken South Africa. Within our local setting, we know very well that the ushering in of political independence for the South African blacks, has not brought with it socio-economic independence for many of these people. Saayman⁴⁰ convincingly argues that

our society is characterized more and more by class apartheid...This entrenchment of inequality and class apartheid flows from the reality that the political settlement which led to the 1994 elections was mainly an elite pact...The core consequences of this elite pacting can be summarized as an agreement behind the scenes that the white elite would surrender political economy in exchange for assurances that their economica [sic] power would be left basically unchallenged. At the same time, a limited number of the new black elite would be allowed easy entrance to a share of economical power in addition to the majority of political power.⁴¹

We are also painfully aware that within the global neo-colonial scene, Africa's resources are not always sufficiently channelled to address the basic needs of the poor. These resources continue to benefit the greedy African rulers and the rich Northern and (and in some cases Eastern) powers, most of whom are least interested in supporting the HIV and AIDS cause.⁴²

We now turn to another HIV and AIDS sensitive engagement with the book of Job:

2 Gerald West with Bongi Zengele

In an article titled "Reading Job 'Positively' in the Context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa," Gerald West together with Bongi Zengele presents the results of a Bible Study interaction with a group of twelve people in Pietermaritzburg.

³⁹ West & Zengele, "Reading Job 'Positively'," 114-115.

⁴⁰ Willem Saayman, "Prophetic Theology in SA circa 2010: some observations" (paper read at a Seminar of the Department of Church History, Christian Spirituality and Missiology, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 18 March, 2010).

⁴¹ Saayman, "Prophetic Theology in South Africa," 4-5.

⁴² Nadar, "'Barak God and Die!'" 61.

Their aim with the interaction seems to have been to facilitate a shift from the popular reading of Job 1:21 at the funerals of those who died on account of AIDS to a different text found in the same book, that is, Job 3. From West and Zengele's interaction with the group of people living with AIDS, we gain the impression that on the whole, the group was empowered by the text: articulating their own feelings of hurt; the knowledge that they were more than their bodies, their observation that it was theologically permissible to express their anger, owning their feelings, even if it required cursing God in prayer, among others.⁴³

The authors need to be lauded for their boldness not only in being socially engaged scholars, but also, for their commitment to allow the lived reality of people living with AIDS (PLWA) to interact freely with the biblical text. From their conversations and conclusion, the reader is nonetheless left with the impression that the challenge of the pandemic of HIV and AIDS is basically a matter between the individual sufferer, the person who infected him/her, her/his family and God. This has occurred despite West's earlier observation (in the chapter) on the historical intersectedness of marginalisation in South Africa: "Race, class, gender and culture are all factors in the epidemiology of the disease in our country."⁴⁴ Most of these categories, though, were found to be missing from their involvement with the text of Job 3.

Questions such as the following could be asked: What kind of product would have emerged if the link was made between poverty (and the suffering caused by HIV and AIDS) in our contexts and the link between poverty (the poor people and the sick Job) and the unjust systems of Job's time? What kind of reading might have emerged if issues around the heteronormativity displayed by the text of Job 3, with its misogynistic nature (cf. Job's attack on female anatomy)⁴⁵ could have been raised? How different would the engagement of the group with the text have been, if issues concerning the (re)definitions of masculinities, sexuality and chastity could have formed part of the discussions? How might answers to such questions impact on our integration of the discourse of HIV and AIDS with the Hebrew Bible?

These, and other relevant questions could, in our view, have enabled the HIV and AIDS biblical hermeneutic to go beyond the levels of the individuals, to also engage the systems that impact negatively on those in the margins, those

⁴³ West & Zengele, "Reading Job 'Positively,'" 118-122.

⁴⁴ West & Zengele, "Reading Job 'Positively,'" 118.

⁴⁵ Cf. Job's curse of his birthday, implicitly his attacks levelled at his mother's womb and the breasts that he sucked as well as the knees that received him. For more details on this cf. Madipoane Masenya's (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Her-Appropriation of His-Lament? Her-Lament of Job 3, from an African Story-Telling Approach An African Story-Telling Reading of Job 3," *Theologia Viatorum* 33/3 (2009): 385-408.

who continue to be the victims of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Such a hermeneutic in our view, would be a little more holistic.

3 Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele)

Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele)⁴⁶ makes an attempt to problematise the notion of retributive justice⁴⁷ when the HIV and AIDS discourse is brought to bear on African-South African women's interactions with the biblical text.

Influenced by the androcentricity of the text and her commitment to situating the plight of HIV and AIDS within the context of African women in South Africa, Masenya decided to "problematise" the identity of Job by giving him a female name, that is, Mmalehu (the mother of death). Her lamentation about the infection of the "innocent" wives serves not only to highlight the role of the individuals in the fight against HIV and AIDS, but also, and more importantly, to challenge the system of patriarchy with its endorsement of unequal power relations between women and men. The structural sin/evil of poverty within the context of the production of the book of Job, and the present state of poverty within the post-apartheid context, the poverty experienced by Africa within the post-colonial and neo-colonial settings, are left untouched by her. As already noted, this kind of approach is likely to leave the readers with the notion that the challenge posed by the pandemic is solely a matter to be left in the hands of the affected individuals. Within such a framework, the latter have a responsibility to sort out their own challenges, an observation that we hinted at in the introductory section on the sermon about Jesus.

In our view, it is such "limited"/"restricted" approaches to and/or readings of biblical texts that are likely, albeit inadvertently, to perpetuate the stereotype of a dark continent. In this regard, we wish to heed Hinga's caution that:

I raise this question of stereotypes about Africa and their hardly camouflaged invocation with the intention of explaining the mystery of AIDS, not to repeat the scholarly critique of these myths and stereotypes. Neither do I wish to indulge in reverse finger pointing. My concern is to raise awareness of the power of discourse (in this case on Africa) to affect people's attitudes and behaviours. Quite apart from the injustice of reducing Africa and its people to the negativity of disease and pestilence (as if diseases and pestilence is a peculiarly African problem), the stereotypes of Africa, coated with seeming scientific accuracy, lead inevitably to policies, decisions and practices about the continent that further compound the problems that Africans as a whole face.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Between Unjust Suffering and the 'Silent' God," 186-199.

⁴⁷ Chitando and Gunda, "HIV and AIDS, Stigma," 191.

⁴⁸ Hinga, "Theo-Ethical Challenges and Imperatives," 79-80.

Persuaded by our attempt to come up with a more holistic HIV and AIDS sensitive biblical hermeneutic, we are basically in tune with the arguments of Masenya in her article titled: "The optimism of the wise in Israel and in Africa: Helpful in the time of HIV/AIDS?"⁴⁹

In her view, the complex nature of factors such as poverty, patriarchy, oppressive biblical hermeneutics, globalisation, unfriendly government policies on HIV and AIDS, complacency on the part of governments and many more factors, should caution biblical scholars and theologians alike, to engage the optimistic philosophy of rewards and punishments to the victims of AIDS carefully. We need to be compelled by our sensitivity to the urgency caused by the plight of our time to develop a responsible HIV/AIDS-conscious critical hermeneutic.⁵⁰

With the preceding brief background to the HIV and AIDS readings of the book of Job by some South African biblical scholars, we now, in an attempt to arrive at an ethical, holistic HIV and AIDS sensitive reading of the biblical text, turn to Esther 1.

D READING ESTHER 1 THROUGH AN HIV AND AIDS LENS

1 Introduction

Before we engage the Esther text here, Cheryl Anderson's intriguing observation on the need for inclusivity in our efforts at biblical interpretation is worthy of note:

As argued throughout our discussions, biblical texts themselves and the controlling interpretations of the church encode the values and perspectives of privileged heterosexual males. Furthermore, biblical texts construct a gender paradigm of male dominance/female subordination that has been used historically to support the dominance of the white Western Christian male over those who are non-white, non-Christian and non-Western (from the Two-Thirds World). Under this schema, homosexuality is condemned because it connotes a subordinate male, and males should always be dominant, and females should always be subordinate and never dominant. Fundamentally, then, the struggles against sexism, homophobia,

⁴⁹ Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "The Optimism of the Wise in Israel and in Africa: How Helpful in the Time of HIV/AIDS?" *Old Testament Essays* 18/2 (2005): 296-308.

⁵⁰ Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "The Optimism of the Wise in Israel and in Africa," 306.

white supremacy, neo-colonial dynamics and Christian violence against non-Christians are intimately connected.⁵¹

As we engage the power dynamics revealed in Vashti's interaction with men in a patriarchal context in the following paragraphs, Anderson's observation on how the text entrenches unequal power distribution among peoples will become clearer. Why? The texts privileges the perspective of heterosexual males, even as embedded in it, is the gender paradigm of male dominance and female subordination; an observation that is clearly revealed by the male narrator's (as well as the male characters') incapacity to tolerate an "insubordinate" female character such as Vashti. As we engage such dynamics in our search for an ethical reading of the biblical text, we ask the following question:

Could the Vashti character in Esther 1 be helpful as we engage the Hebrew Bible within the HIV and AIDS discourse?

2 Vashti, a helpful model in the time of HIV and AIDS?

At face value, modern readers of this character might not view her as a suitable model for those who are looking for an HIV and AIDS-conscious biblical hermeneutic. However, a closer look at Vashti's function in the text of Esther and the way in which she navigates through the pressures imposed on her by the systems of the time, might cast light on why we have elected to give her some attention in this article.

As an outsider to the ethnicity of the narrator, in our view, Vashti suffers violence from the Jewish narrator who uses her to pave a way for the main female character of the book, who is one of his own nation in terms of ethnicity, that is, Esther.⁵² Despite Vashti's early erasure from the text of Esther, we hold the same opinion as those commentators who see a link between the two wives of Ahasuerus. They argue that the subsequent acts of Esther towards the king as well as the latter's interaction with Esther, in one way or another, reveal the marks left by Vashti's actions at the beginning of the story.

The observations of Bal⁵³ come to mind here:

Vashti, for example, is integral to the production of Esther. The plot requires the elimination of Vashti in order to open up a space for Esther to fill ... But Vashti is eliminated only to be restored as Esther, who takes her place and avenges her by reformulating dis-

⁵¹ Cheryl B. Anderson, *Ancient Laws & Contemporary Controversies: The need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 152-153.

⁵² Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "A small Herb Increases Itself by a Strong Order: Reimagining Vashti in an African-South African Context." *Old Testament Essays* 16 (2003): 332-342.

⁵³ Mieke Bal, "Lots of Writing," in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 233.

obedience as achieving power. *Vashti's refusal to be an object of display is in a sense a refusal to be objectivized, hence to be robbed of her subjectivity.*⁵⁴ (Our emphasis: LB & MM).

In Bal's view, Vashti is in fact not eliminated from the story. Her act of defiance and thus her affirmation of being a subject in her own right, only served to prepare a space for another woman who would redefine disobedience as an act of gaining power. Vashti asserted her power as a subject in a patriarchal context by refusing to be an object of male gaze.

We have selected Vashti in our quest for an HIV and AIDS hermeneutic on account of the following observations:

2a Suffering literary and sexual violence

As already noted, Vashti suffers narrative violence because she is used by the narrator very briefly and quickly to make room for one who will be a worthy queen according to the patriarchal standards of the Persian Empire. The reason provided by the narrator that Vashti was deposed from being queen (and thus unilaterally divorced) on account of her refusal to appear before the king to display her beauty, is not convincing to the modern reader of this story. Although the narrator's treatment of the Vashti character is helpful in disclosing the normativity of the heteropatriarchy entrenched in the biblical text, in our view, such a marginalisation and/or violence committed against a character, has caused this character perpetual harm through the years of biblical interpretation. Even today, Vashti continues to be silenced by many commentators. We wish to avoid repeating the mistake of being silent about this important character whose analysis might help us in our search for an ethical HIV and AIDS sensitive hermeneutic even as we are aware of the continued silence/silencing and violence suffered by people living with AIDS.

Through the Vashti character, the violence suffered by women's bodies on account of male sexual desire comes to light, albeit covertly. Her sudden removal from the narrative, at the hasty, unwise whim of her foolish husband, leaves the reader with an impression that nobody/man cared about her sexual needs. Is this not what patriarchy and its dangerous masculinities dictate? That the sexuality which is more important is that of male human beings? Chitando and Chirongoma argue:

The male quest for sexual pleasure has had negative consequences, for women, children and men themselves in the era of HIV. Although there are factors that facilitate the spread of HIV, including poverty, migrant labour, international justice and others, patterns of male sexual behavior require urgent attention ... Unfortunately, many men strive to live up to the ideal of competence and conquest

⁵⁴ Bal, "Lots of Writing," 233.

in the area of sexuality. Most men do not invest in intimacy. They regard sex as a form of entertainment wherein they must be the ones who derive maximum satisfaction. Men have been pampered to believe that their egos must be massaged, and that they must always have things their own way.⁵⁵

Indeed, as present day readers of the story of Vashti's sudden removal from her husband, we do not know how Vashti's sexual needs were to be catered for from then onwards. Not so with her former husband's sexual needs/lust, though. Sooner, rather than later, his search for Vashti's substitute, in the pageant for a queen, will leave the bodies of many a young girl sexually violated.

In Esther 2:1-4 we read:

1. After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, *he remembered Vashti* and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. 2. Then the king's servants who attended to him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. 3. And let the king appoint the commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under custody of Hegal, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given to them. 4 And let the girl who pleases (כַּטִּי) the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king and he did so (Italics and Hebrew insertion: LM and MM).

Worthy of note for the present discussion is that it is not only the memory of Vashti, this outrageously independent woman, but also her absence as a wife to Ahasuerus, which persuades him to think about the need for another wife. Not a previously married wife though. No! A young virgin, who will not only be beautifully appealing/fitting to the king, but also sexually enticing and satisfying!

Nadar argues:

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 into the king's room at night? I suggest that their bodies are violated and raped, being treated as mere objects of desire. The virgins are as violated as the Levite's concubine in Judges 19.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ezra Chitando and Sophie Chirongoma, "Challenging Masculinities: Religious Studies, Men and HIV in Africa," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 14/1 (2008): 55-69.

⁵⁶ Nadar, "Barak God and Die!" 84.

Suffice it to say that such dangerous views about male sexuality have not proven helpful in our fight against HIV and AIDS. In this difficult time, there is a need for liberating definitions of masculinities.

Another factor that causes Vashti's character to be appealing in our quest for an ethical appropriation of the HB in our fight against HIV and AIDS is her actions' capacity to expose heteropatriarchy and its attendant evils.

2b Challenging hetero-patriarchy and its attendant evils within biblical texts

Patriarchy is rooted in the existence of the nuclear family which has served through the ages and across people of different cultures as the model patriarchal social unit. The latter enshrines the male dominance structure. On account of this relationship between patriarchy and the nuclear family, Smith uses the term "heteropatriarchy" to foreground an organisational system which presumes not just males but heterosexual males and creates a hierarchy that is based on a gender binary system with only two genders where the male dominates the other.⁵⁷ It is the entrenchment of such a system that has not only perpetuated violence against women and girl-children: but research has also shown the high prevalence of the HIV infections in heterosexual marriage relationships, an observation that has persuaded some HIV and AIDS women activist scholars to declare heterosexual marriage a risky institution in the era of AIDS. This link between heteropatriarchy and the violence committed against women and children also came to the fore at a recent workshop on diversity by a group which forms the national South African Dutch Reformed task team. During question time, a woman raised a comment to this effect: With the advent of democracy in South Africa, Afrikaner men have been stripped of power. There is a therefore a need for the restoration of the Afrikaner husband to his position as head of the family (cf. Ephesians 5:21-38) in order to deal effectively with the challenge of violence against women and children. A strange but understandable argument though!

As the narrative of Vashti's plight has revealed to us, heteropatriarchy had to function effectively on the home front. It is no wonder that when Vashti dared to challenge the system from a public space, the political leaders were at once concerned that her daring act of insubordination, would spill over to all the Persian households, thus challenging heteropatriarchy as the norm (Esther 1:20): "So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." In

⁵⁷ Andrea Smith. "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing," in *Incite: Women of Color Against Violence, Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006), 66-73.

verse 22 it is stated: "He [the king] sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house." The message was loud and clear: "Heteropatriarchy continues to reign supreme, every husband shall rule (at all costs) over his wife. Every wife, irrespective of their class and intelligence, shall allow themselves to be ruled over!"

In our view, connected to this problematic system is the notion of dangerous masculinities. The latter "refers to the negative/stereotypical conceptions of manhood which emphasise the aggressive, exploitative and abusive aspect of manhood."⁵⁸ As we have already noted above, problematic definitions of masculinities/manhood cannot be helpful in the fight against the pandemic of HIV and AIDS.

The third aspect of Vashti's character that has appealed to us in the context of the discourse on HIV and AIDS is her boldness to speak truth to power.

2c Vashti's influence is felt at the city gates

Vashti's ability to speak *her own mind* and thus challenge the notion of female submission cost her her position as a queen. In a context in which women, irrespective of how close they were to power (cf. Vashti as the queen) were expected to submit even to the problematic demands of men/their husbands, Vashti's boldness in refusing to accede to such demands, should be lauded. She refused to be treated as a public pawn (objectivised) in the hands of her husband. The words of Anderson with regards to patriarchal intolerance of independent strong women come to mind here:

To enforce the nuclear family, therefore, means any attempt by women to control their own lives and their bodies (as in decisions of abortion) interferes with male control over them and contests the patriarchal norm that they should be subordinate to men.⁵⁹

An example of boldness by the "powerless" to say "no" when necessary as was the case with Vashti is much needed in our HIV and AIDS contexts.

Firstly, Vashti's courageous action reminds all those of us who are sitting on the margins of our communities, irrespective of the type of marginalisation that sets us apart from the "mythical norm,"⁶⁰ to speak truth to power. Her negative response to the king's summons was not only immediately felt at the city gates: it was in fact directed to the one who, by virtue of his power as the king of the empire, was the symbol of power at the city gates. All people,

⁵⁸ Chitando and Chirongoma, "Challenging Masculinities," 56.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation*, 138.

⁶⁰ Anderson, *The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation*, 32.

including the HIV and AIDS victims, have a responsibility to challenge, among others, the complacency with which the economically, politically and religiously powerful of our communities/countries treat the pandemic of HIV and AIDS.

Secondly, in our view Vashti becomes a model to all women and men to say "no" to the pandemic of HIV and AIDS. The latter includes the following, among others:

- Simplistic readings of the Bible in which sexist preachers and teachers, lecturers, professors and lay preachers teach/preach female submission at all costs.
- Leaving intact the dangerous definitions of masculinities.
- Claims and threats that the pandemic of HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God.
- The perpetual plunging into poverty of many a people from the Two Thirds World through neo-colonial economic policies which only serve to make Africa a perpetual beggar when its resources continue to be plundered by the rich Northern countries.
- The "class apartheid" that continues to typify the post-apartheid South African context. The economically powerful of South Africa should be shamed by the observation that the South African gap between the poor and the rich ranks among the top in the world!
- Simplistic solutions basically provided by many a church authority regarding the themes of sex and sexuality in the time of AIDS.
- The stigma levelled at the AIDS sufferers.
- Heteropatriarchy with its continued assignment of normativity to a heterosexual male and its continued thriving on the unequal power relations between women and men.

Having lauded Vashti's boldness in the preceding paragraphs, we need to hasten to note that it is her social class that gave her a voice. Research has shown that there are links between HIV and AIDS and poverty, non-literacy, heteropatriarchy and sexual violence against women and children, among others. It may thus be argued that, unlike the rich Vashti, poor women as well as women who continue to believe the myth that the male is the norm, do not always have the luxury to refuse their husbands/partners' unreasonable sexual demands.⁶¹ In the case of poor women, such partners are also their pillars of economic support. We need to hasten to mention though, that in some cases, even the women of class, who in fact are responsible for the economic support

⁶¹ Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "The Optimism of the Wise in Israel and in Africa," 308; "Wa re o bona e hlotša, wa e nametša thaba! Bibeletse, Basadi ba MaAfrika ba Afrika-Borwa le HIV le AIDS," *Verbum at Ecclesia*, 31/1 (2010), Art. #412, 7 pages. DOI: 10.4102/ve.v31i1.412.

of their families, regrettably continue to persevere through abusive marriages. Noteworthy is our earlier observation that the bodies of the Persian girls who opted for a beauty pageant after Vashti's dismissal could easily be exploited for the king's own sexual pleasure (cf. Esther 2:12-18). A girl from a Two Thirds World country, who has been trafficked for sex in a First World country, for example, will most likely not possess power to negotiate for safe sex. Similarly, women, who on account of poverty across all races, are left with prostitution as their only option, do not have the capacity to exercise total control over their own bodies. The character of Vashti has thus also revealed that one's social class, if properly exploited (as Vashti does in the text), will determine the extent to which one's voice would be heard. The voices of the needy when raised, if at all, unlike Vashti's, may never be heard by those who sit at the gates of our cities.

Although Vashti could partially offer the example of a woman who takes an assertive stand when faced with the problematic dictates of heteropatriarchy, her social class cannot be very helpful to poor women in their fight against the pandemic HIV and AIDS. Perhaps Vashti's example could appeal to fellow women of class as she not only challenges them to take responsibility for other women sufferers, but also to say "no" to the continued silence on the prevalence of the pandemic also among the rich, including that among people of Caucasian descent.⁶²

E CONCLUSION

The complexities of the factors that contribute to the thriving of the pandemic of HIV and AIDS require that we bring complex, albeit helpful solutions to the table. Precisely on account of this observation, as well as the normative status that is still accorded the Christian scriptures (the HB in our case) by many a South African, together with the unethical use of the Christian Bible in addressing the infected and affected (cf. the example of the sermon analysed in the introduction), and the complex nature of the Hebrew Bible itself, a document which is at times ethically questionable; there is a need to approach the challenge in a more holistic way; a need for approaches that enable us to handle it ethically. The nature of the God-talk and biblical hermeneutics (cf. our reading of Esther 1 in this article) will have an impact particularly on those sufferers who still have the courage to turn to the Christian Scriptures as a helpful resource in the midst of challenging situations. Although we are painfully aware that the South African biblical sciences scholarship is basically still silent on the discourse of HIV and AIDS as it is mainstreamed within our sermons, Bible Studies and theological curricula, we are also heartened by a few scholars who have elected to continue the tradition of the former liberation theologians and biblical scholars to raise a prophetic voice against all forms of

⁶² Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), 2010.

injustices in the post-apartheid South Africa. As they do so, they serve as a motivation to all of us and, in particular, to the younger generation of emerging scholars, particularly those who are located on the African continent that we all cannot afford the luxury to do theology without being socially engaged.

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Madipoane Masenya(ngwan'a Mphahlele), Lehlohonolo Bookholane, Department of Old Testament & Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, Pretoria, 0003. *Email*: masenmj@unisa.ac.za.

Lehlohonolo Bookholane, Department of Old Testament & Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, Pretoria, 0003. *Email*: bookhlj@unisa.ac.za.