
SENZENI NA?

SPEAKING OF GOD ‘WHAT IS RIGHT’ AND THE ‘RE-TURN’ OF THE STIGMATISING COMMUNITY IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV

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Abstract

This article uses the Ujamaa Centre’s work on the book of Job as a case-study for how the resources of biblical studies have enabled access to the biblical tradition of lament, and of how the lament of people living with HIV has posed new questions to biblical scholarship. The article traces an interpretive trajectory from embodied theologies of acceptance (Job 1:21) to the emergence of embodied theologies of lament (Job 3), tracking how the book of Job has provided support groups of people living positively with HIV to speak of and to God, speaking of and to God “what is right” (Job 42:7) as did Job.

Key Words: HIV; Job; Retribution; Stigma; Protest

Introduction

“Senzeni na?” Since the 1950s the haunting sounds of this lament have been heard in South Africa, at funerals, mostly, but also in political marches and in church. “Senzeni na? What have we done?” The form of the song has endured, but the content has adapted to the changing profile of African struggles.¹ “Senzeni na?” is a song of protest, but also a song of hope, yearning for a day when the oppression being resisted will be no more.²

Senzeni na? [What have we done?]

Sono sethu, ubumyama? [Our sin is that we are black?]

Sono sethu, yinyaniso? [Our sin is the truth?]

Sibulawayo! [We are being killed!]

Mayibuye iAfrica! [Let Africa return!]

In the 1980s this song could be heard almost daily, and definitely on Saturdays when the communities gathered to bury those murdered by the apartheid regime and their surrogates. Two decades after liberation the song is still being sung. The terrain of struggle has shifted from political liberation to economic liberation, and the related struggle for deliverance from HIV and Aids. Funerals are still the primary social location for this song.

This article uses the Ujamaa Centre’s work on the book of Job as a case study for how the resources of biblical studies have enabled access to the biblical tradition of lament, and of how the lament of people living with HIV has posed new questions to biblical scholarship. The article traces an interpretative trajectory from embodied theologies of acceptance (Job 1:21) to the emergence of embodied theologies of lament (Job 3), tracing how the book of Job has provided support groups of people living positively with HIV to speak of and to God, speaking of and to God “what is right” (Job 42:7) as did Job. This collaborative partnership is the thread that holds the article together, as it describes and analyses how socially-engaged

biblical scholars work collaboratively with communities which have been marginalised by biblical theologies of stigmatisation, discrimination, and condemnation. The article begins and ends with the haunting refrains of “Senzeni na?”, beginning with the strange juxtaposition of this song of lament and the liturgical funerary recitation of Job 1:21, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord”.

Senzeni na?

In her analysis of the rhetoric of this song, Sisanda Nkoala notes, the first three lines of “Senzeni na?” “are posed as rhetorical questions, leading to the conclusion that part of the song’s efficacy lies in its approach of posing probing questions that are not meant to be answered, but rather are meant to evoke an internal response from the subconscious of those being questioned”.³ The repetition of each line, often sung four times, reinforces the rhetorical stance of interrogation, inviting the singers to reflect both as individuals and corporately, for the song is always rendered *en masse*.

The fourth line of the song shifts from question to statement. While there may be debate about what Black people had done to deserve death, there is no debate about the death itself. The song concludes in the subjunctive mood: “Mayibuye iAfrica” [“Let Africa return”]. This line, according to Nkoala,

is a demand, and somewhat of an instruction, that, based on the fact that there really was no logical answer to why black people were suffering, they now need to act to claim Africa back for Africans. It is as though it is compelling the singers that now that they have argued and proved the absurd nature of the injustices to which they were being subjected, they must work at reclaiming the Africa that they know and love, in order to restore it to its former glory and its original people. This is an important aspect of how the song manages to be persuasive because without a call to action, it would merely be a deliberation of what had happened, and not really a rhetorical text that persuades the audience to some form of action.⁴

Nkoala’s interpretation of the rhetorical import of this final line is feasible, anticipating that the answer to the questions of the first three lines is obvious:

What have we done? Nothing.

Is our sin that we are black? No.

Is our sin the truth? No.⁵

However, Nkoala does not take into account the rhetorical tradition that frames (almost certainly) the song, for the song is derived from the Bible. The song is theological, and the primary interlocutor is God. The song is both a cry to God and a cry about God. The source of the song is the biblical book of Job and the biblical Psalms. Job provides the specificity of a direct interrogation of God, and the Psalms provide the more general rhetoric of both individual and communal lament.

“Senzeni na?” This song of lamenting protest has found an echo in other less theological forms of popular culture, including the haunting art of Trevor Makhoba, who conjures up a Job-inspired biblical beast that devours our African people with its HIV upper jaw and its Aids lower jaw,⁶ and the music of ‘people’s poet’ Mzwakhe Mbuli, who uses lament-like language to interrogate God:

Lord my God, I do not understand.

Punish me not, for I am ignorant.

Is there a new commandment?

“Thou shall suffer perpetually”?
“Thou shall die more than other races”?

Now I understand why other nations weep when the child is born.

Lord my God, do you care about the poor?

Why then remove the shepherd from the sheep?

Is there a hidden prophecy about the plight of the Black people?

Is there a curse bestowed upon us? / Senzeni thina sizwe esimnyama [What have we Black people done]?⁷

Though neither of these community-based artist-activists cite the biblical book of Job directly, the rhetoric and imagery of Job is evident in both. So while the more familiar refrain from Job 1:21 is a formal part of most funerals – “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21) – the poetic protest of Job inhabits Makhoba’s images, haunts Mbali’s rhetoric, and is embodied in the singing of “Senzeni na?”

Unfortunately, HIV and even Aids remain among us, particularly in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, the very epicentre of the epidemic world-wide.⁸ “Senzeni na?” So even though it is more than three decades after HIV was identified, this remains an appropriate time to interrogate the theological logic of this lament. In this article I reflect on nearly twenty-five years of re-reading the biblical book of Job with organised groups of people living with HIV and Aids.⁹

Recovering the Poetic Protest of Job (Chapter 3)

Besides its regular appearance at funerals, the book of Job had not featured that much in South African popular culture nor in African biblical scholarship.¹⁰ But the advent of HIV and its associated disease, Aids, has recovered the neglected poetry of Job.¹¹

In our work with people living with HIV, who are overt about their HIV-positive status, the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research has turned to the book of Job, and in so doing has returned the poetry of Job to those on the margins of the church.¹² While our collaborative Contextual Bible Studies with the Siyaphila community-based organisation of people living with HIV and Aids focused initially on biblical texts from the Gospels which affirmed the solidarity of God and Jesus with those who are HIV-positive, over against the condemnatory stigmatisation they experienced from their families, the church, and society in general,¹³ we have journeyed with them into the book of Job in the last decade and a half.

Too many funerals, and too much of Job 1:21, prompted us to read on into the poetry, into Job 3.¹⁴ With the poet Mzwakhe Mbali we have wondered: “Why are there so many more funerals than weddings?/Do you [God] know that our graves are overcrowded?”¹⁵ Trusting in the solidarity of God, we have had the courage to ask hard questions, even at the time when many of those participating in support groups would die. More recently, experiencing in our bodies the life-giving effects of antiretroviral treatment, we have had the wonderful luxury of time to lament.¹⁶ Like Job we have turned to interrogate God.

After one too many funerals and one too many liturgical recitations of Job 1:21, being attentive to ‘the signs of our times’, Bongi Zengele, who co-ordinated the Ujamaa Centre’s HIV and Aids work, invited me to join her with a local Siyaphila support group and to read Job 3 together within a Contextual Bible Study format.¹⁷ After our first Contextual Bible Study on Job 3, the Siyaphila participants asked Bongi Zengele whether we would please do this Bible study with their families. Their deepest yearning is to be accepted by their families, and so they longed for their families to learn what they had learned from the book of Job. But what, I reflect on more fully in this article, had they appropriated?

As we explored Job 3 together in that Contextual Bible Study a young man, one of the few men at that time to participate in a Siyaphila [We are alive/well] group,¹⁸ voiced his despair, declaring that he knew exactly how Job felt, fantasizing about his death.

- ³ “Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’
- ⁴ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it.
- ⁵ Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds settle upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.
- ⁶ That night – let thick darkness seize it! let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months.
- ⁷ Yes, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry be heard in it (Job 3:3-7 NRSV).

Trembling with emotion, he told us how he had had to fight the desire to take his own life after he was diagnosed as HIV-positive. He had managed, he continued, to live ‘positively’, drawing deeply on the support of the Siyaphila network. But, he declared, turning directly to me as one of the facilitators, our reading of Job 3 on this day had reignited the smouldering desire for death. Why should he not, he asked me, take his own life?

It was a moment of utter terror for me. I realised I had made a terrible mistake in offering this biblical text to the group. In that moment of complete panic I looked to my co-facilitator and colleague, Bongi Zengele, hoping desperately that her experience and wisdom would offer a word of hope. Instead, she embraced and calmed me with her wonderful smile, silently encouraging me to trust the Contextual Bible Study process: See-Judge-Act. ‘See’: analyse reality from the perspective of those living with this reality. ‘Judge’: allow the prophetic theological traditions of the Bible to come alongside this analysed reality. ‘Act’: construct together enabling and empowering ways of transforming this analysed reality.

So, doing what facilitators do, I turned to the group and asked them if they had anything to offer our brother (prolonging the ‘See’ moment). But he interrupted this attempt to draw on the resources of the group, stood and pointed at me, and said, “No, why do you say I should not leave this place and take my life”. He was insistent that I respond. Again, I looked in alarm at Bongi Zengele, and again she smiled. So I turned to the text (moving into the ‘Judge’ component of the process), saying that though Job, like him, had fantasised about his own death, using an array of images (which the group had already identified), Job had not contemplated taking his own life. He had directed, instead, his desire for death towards God, imagining the many ways in which God might have brought about his death at birth (3:3-19) or before he had experienced his current troubles (3:20-26). Though he continued to lament about his life in chapter three and in his other speeches, I said, he seemed to accept that his life was in God’s hands.

Remarkably, my turn to the text seemed to satisfy the young man, and he nodded and sat amongst us again. But I now felt the need to respond to his outburst, fearing that he might feel he had done ‘the wrong thing’ by so openly lamenting. So I carried on, following the poetic narrative through to the end, summarising briefly how Job refused to restrain his lament in the face of his friends’ arguments (throughout the poetic speech cycles), how Job even refused to retract his lament when finally face-to-face with God (38-42:6), and how in the prose epilogue God commended Job for “having spoken of/to God what is right” (42:7). It seemed to me, I concluded, that both what and how Job had spoken to/of God was right/appropriate/just, given Job’s reality.

Others now rejoined the discussion, sharing their own doubt, fear, and despair. Some time later, after nearly three hours together, Bongi Zengele brought our time together to a

conclusion, inviting us to breathe deeply in unison and to pray for one another. Flowing from this liturgical moment, what might be called a spirituality of liberation,¹⁹ she then invited them to write, each in their own language, their own version of Job 3. Quietly, each of the participants found their own space in the room and wrote. We then asked them whether they would be willing to share what they had written with others outside of the group. They were unanimous, making it clear that what they had written must be shared with others. Just as Job 3 expressed Job's struggle with disease and discrimination, so too what they had written expressed their reality, and they wanted this reality to be heard and understood by their families, churches, and communities. They made it clear too that they wanted their names to be associated with what they had expressed, but without a particular name being associated with a particular personal lament. We have honoured their wishes, making known what is embodied, hoping that others will find encouragement to lament likewise.²⁰

By the end of our workshop we were exhausted, but strangely at peace. It was then, as we contemplated the 'Act' aspect of the Contextual Bible Study process, that we were asked whether we would be willing to do this same Contextual Bible Study with their families. We have done the Contextual Bible Study on Job 3 often since, and together with the Siyaphila support network Bongi Zengele has established programmes to draw the families of those living with HIV alongside them as they continue the struggle to live positively. But I regularly return to that first time, reflecting whether I have spoken of Job what is right.²¹

Returning Lament to the Faith Community (Job 19)

Returning lament to the lives of those whose churches insist on the retributive theological trajectory of Job's friends was clearly a liberating experience.²² But what was it that they wanted their families to know? Was it that lament was a 'biblical' and therefore legitimate aspect of their (and the Christian) faith? Was it that Job refused to accept the dominant retributive theological tradition of his (and our) time? Was it that Job persisted in his integrity (2:9), refusing to embrace a false sense of guilt, before his friends and even God? Was it that God affirmed Job's ways of speaking to and with God? These questions lurked as we continued in our Contextual Bible Study praxis, year after year, working with Job for more than a decade.

Recognising that we had touched something significant among the Siyaphila members, we began to develop another Contextual Bible Study around lament. We chose Job 19 for a number of reasons. Briefly, I chose it,²³ first, because it is Job's sixth speech, demonstrating that Job's lament is a sustained discourse, not a momentary and aberrant genre. Second, this speech (Job 19:1-29) summarises Job's complaint against his friends (2-6, 21-22, 28-29). And third, this speech summarises Job's indirect, reflective-reflexive attitude towards God (without addressing God directly) (7-20, 23-27).²⁴ I decided to exclude verses 25-29 because these verses of chapter 19 have a strong reception history in the churches, where they are read Christologically. However, like David Clines I read these verses in continuity with the literary character of Job we have come to know through his speeches.²⁵ In verses 25-29 Job is not trusting in some external agent to vindicate him; his desire is that his own words, his own argument, "inscribed in a book" or "engraved on a rock", will represent him before God, even if/when he is no longer able. His articulated reality is his testimony. I wanted this Contextual Bible Study to stay focused on the internal 'emic' logic of the book of Job, rather than to be deflected by the reception history of verses 25-29.

As with all our work in local communities, trying to construct a connected series of related Contextual Bible Studies with the Siyaphila network of support groups proved

difficult. The participants in each workshop vary, and so while some of the participants in this Contextual Bible Study on Job 19 had done the one on Job 3, many had not. As facilitators, Bongi Zengele, Tracey Wright and I were regularly asked to affirm or offer a summary of the shape of the book of Job as a whole. What I had to accept, as a biblical scholar, was that these ‘ordinary’ readers/hearers of the book of Job had their own understandings of what this shape looked like! The contribution of Contextual Bible Study is to allow the slow²⁶ attention to the detail of the text to disrupt our ecclesiastically received understandings of the dominant and dominating shapes of biblical texts.

What they remembered of the book as a whole was that Job was the victim of a heavenly debate between God and ‘the satan’ (which they remembered as the proper noun ‘Satan’), that Job was compliant, accepting his suffering, and that in the end God had restored him miraculously. They were not clear about the details of his restoration, but imagined it as a miraculous restoration. What this Contextual Bible Study on chapter 19 contributed to the participants’ sense of the shape of the whole was a much clearer sense that Job was not as accepting of his suffering as they re-membered. Indeed, 19:1-22 offered them a clear sense of Job’s refusal to accept both the perspective of the friends and what God was doing to him. They were truly amazed by how Job spoke to his friends and by how he reflected to himself about God (verses 6-20). But what was most significant for them was Job’s protesting plea to his friends not to stigmatise him.

What we had learned from the Contextual Bible Study on Job 3 was that stigmatisation by their families, churches and communities was the primary ‘struggle’ they faced. How to talk of/to God was an important, but secondary ‘struggle’. So we concentrated, at first, on this primarily reality, exploring how the Ujamaa Centre might serve those living with HIV by offering Contextual Bible Study resources that showed God taking a stand against stigma. As I have already indicated above, Siyaphila support group members were drawn to the Gospels, precisely because they found there a Jesus who takes a clear stance with the marginalised and against those who stigmatise them. It was only from this biblical site of solidarity that they dared to venture into lament, first in ‘discovering’ the lamenting Job of chapter 3 and then the relentless resistance of Job in chapter 19. Furthermore, from the Contextual Bible Study on Job 3 we had discerned a narrative connection across the poetry between Job 3 and into the prose of Job 42, where at last God takes a clear stand with the stigmatised Job over against Job’s friends. With our experience of having worked on Job 3 and Job 19, we began work in earnest on another Contextual Bible Study, this one focusing on Job chapter 42, the final chapter.

Reflecting on the Restoration of Job (Chapter 42)

From our work on Job 3, and its potential line of connection to Job 42:7, we seemed to have found a significant resource, one that might be a pivotal theological point for those who are HIV-positive, attempting to live positively in a context where the dominant theology is strongly retributive.²⁷

But what of Job 42:1-6? Had I rushed too quickly to 42:7? Though our Contextual Bible Study, as I will demonstrate, did not linger on 42:1-6, these first six verses of chapter 42 cannot be ignored by biblical scholarship. While Job certainly reconsiders, I do not think that Job repents, recants, or retracts in his concluding speech (42:1-6).²⁸ Notwithstanding the syntactic and semantic complexities of these verses,²⁹ it is out of character to read the text in a way that envisages a sudden shift in character. It is difficult, in terms of narrative characterisation, to see the lamenting, protesting, and resisting Job we have come to know in the poetry undergoing such a radical change.³⁰ Job has never been in any doubt that God is in

control or that God is powerful, which is the primary argument of the God speeches in chapters 38-41; he has experienced in his body the effects of God's control and power. What Job does not understand is the logic of God's control or the justice of God's exercise of power, and in these respects the God speeches are less forthcoming.³¹

Leo Perdue also wonders whether a contrite and repentant Job fits with a character who is, so far, full of integrity.³² A form-critical consideration assists Perdue in moving towards a different interpretation. Within the literary tradition of wisdom literature, a doxology, such as we find in verses 2-6, usually follows a judgement. What if, Perdue suggests, we read Job's doxology as preceding the judgement of God in verses 7-8?³³ How this particular response of Job's, the doxology, then speaks what is right about/to God becomes foregrounded from among Job's many other speeches, even though, Perdue argues, it is not substantially different. Perdue is adamant that while the orientation of verses 2-6 is one of praise,³⁴ "what is not rejected is the process of engaging in lament, indictment, and assault which have led him and the implied audience to this point".³⁵ In the language Carol Newsom uses, Job refuses "not to see the rent at the heart of world".³⁶

David Clines concurs, arguing that in Job's first speech within the divine speeches (40:3-5), Job "does not withdraw a word he has said, he does not admit that God is in the right or that he is in the wrong, he does not confess to any sins or apologize for what he has said".³⁷ Clines recognises too that the nodal verse of Job's second speech within the divine speeches (42:1-6) is verse 6, in which Job "faces two ways: in respect to the past, he has had no satisfaction, but he will draw a line beneath it; in respect of the future, he intends to live as a social being surrounded by his support group, no longer as an outcast on the ash heap".³⁸ So Clines translates this speech as follows:

¹ Then Job answered Yahweh:

² I know that you can do anything,

and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ "Who is this who obscures the Design without knowledge?", you ask.

To be sure, I made my depositions – without understanding –

concerning things too wonderful for me – which I did not know.

⁴ "Listen, and I will speak", you said,

"I will question you, and you shall answer me".

⁵ I have heard you with my ears,

and my eyes have now seen you.

⁶ So I submit, and I accept consolation

for my dust and ashes.³⁹

Crucially, for Clines, it is only in the legal sense that Job "submits". He formally withdraws the formal lawsuit he has lodged against Yahweh (13:18). Since, Clines continues, "he has done no wrong, he cannot 'repent', but having been in mourning he now brings the period of mourning to an end by 'accepting consolation', for his lost children as well as for the loss of his honor, a consolation that is being offered to him both from the friends and (in his own way) from Yahweh".⁴⁰

According to Clines, Job "acknowledges the omnipotence of Yahweh (v2)", "he accepts that he has intruded into the area of 'marvels', in which he has no competence (v3b)", and "now that he has heard the utterances Yahweh has addressed personally to him (v5), he abandons his suit against God (v6a) together with his mourning and he intends to resume his normal life (v6b)".⁴¹ While I concur with the second and third points, I wonder about the first. In my reading of the God speeches, I have wondered whether the God character is not only

exploring the limits of Job’s (and so humanity’s) power, but also the limits of God’s power. Perhaps the God speeches, particularly the discourses on Behemoth (40:15-24) and Leviathan (41:1-34), acknowledge the problem of the limits of power, with God summoning Job, implicitly, to collaborate with God in the unfinished business of bringing about justice-order.⁴² Given that Job quotes, in an adapted form (42:2b), from Genesis 11:6, and that this text rejects the hubris of human power,⁴³ perhaps these same words in Job’s mouth questions God’s power.

The God speeches become, in this reading, a call to Job to join God in the ongoing and incomplete work of redemption. So I would translate 42:6 as follows:

Consequently, [given what you have said, particularly about Behemoth and Leviathan] I reconsider [my view that you are all-powerful],

and I turn from [lamenting in] dust and ashes [in order to join you in your ongoing work of redemption and in order to rejoin my community].

However, in a way it does not matter how we read 42:6, for that is part of the ‘private’ poetic encounter between Job and God. The shift from verse 6 to 7 is substantial,⁴⁴ for we now leave the ‘private’ domain and enter the public domain. We are to imagine, I suggest, an audience of those who have stigmatised and withdrawn from Job (including his community (17:6) and his friends) listening and watching as God takes sides with Job. They then become participants, contributing to and so becoming implicated in the ritual that redeems the friends (and them) and reintegrates Job into his/their community. This, I think, is why members of the Siyaphila Bible study group want us to do such Contextual Bible Studies with their families.

Constructing a Contextual Bible Study

Contextual Bible Study locates itself, in brief, in the nexus of exegesis and appropriation.⁴⁵ Our context compels us to search the biblical text for potential resources, and the biblical text offers potential lines of connection with our context. The starting point can be either, but the dialogical movement between them is essential to the process, which is always cyclical. Having been prompted by the questions and responses of the Siyaphila group to our Contextual Bible Studies on Job 3 and Job 19 we re-turned to Job 42, to read it more carefully and fully.

Given the difficulties, both syntactically and narratively, of verses 1-6, I chose to begin the Contextual Bible Study on this literary sub-unit at verse 7.

⁷ After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” (Job 42:7 NRSV)

The first moment of Job’s restoration is the clarity of God’s identification with Job. God not only affirms Job as “my servant” (v7a), God goes further, affirming both what and how Job has spoken of and to God (v7b). We do not know precisely which speeches God is referring to here; Job has spoken a great deal! But perhaps this is the point, perhaps God is affirming the diversity of Job’s engagements. Perhaps God is affirming both the moments of acceptance (1:21) and the many moments of doubt and questioning (beginning in chapter 3). God affirms, perhaps, that it is legitimate for Job (and us) to both accept and doubt God’s ways. It is acceptable, it would seem from God’s affirmation of Job, to castigate and interrogate God, to lament about and to God.

⁷ After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite:

“My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.

⁸ Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done” (Job 42:7-8 NRSV).

God’s next move is as remarkable as God’s first. Having affirmed Job, God rebukes the friends. If we are surprised by God’s affirmation of Job, we are as surprised by God’s rebuke of the friends. For the friends have spoken about God in the traditional way, insisting that Job has done something to deserve his suffering. But God stands with Job and against Job’s friends. God is not neutral. The second moment is one of God taking sides.

Indeed, God goes further, invoking a third moment by involving Job in the restoration of his friends. God ‘returns’ to Job some of agency he has lost in the face of his friends and community. Job had regularly lamented his loss of subjectivity in his speeches as we have seen in Job 19; God now makes him an agent.

This moment leads into a fourth moment of restoration, as those who had been primarily responsible for stigmatising Job are required, by God, to acknowledge their “folly” formally and publically. The public dimension is vital. God requires that the friends not only come to Job (privately?) for prayer, but that they participate in a public ritual. God is specific, they must take “seven bulls and seven rams”, a substantial number, for in Ezekiel 45:23 this same number is offered for the whole people of Israel; and in the other cases in the Old Testament where seven bulls and seven rams are offered (Numbers 23:1, 29; 1 Chronicles 15:26; 2 Chronicles 29:21) “the stakes are much higher than they are in the case of Job’s friends”.⁴⁶ But perhaps the stakes are high here precisely because theological certainty of the friends’ sort is seriously dangerous. God feels misrepresented by the friends, and such is the extent of their misrepresentation that God draws Job in to deal with the matter **as** a co-worker with God. If my reading of verse 6 is correct, then God has taken Job up on his willingness to be a co-worker with God. Job is, in every sense, God’s “servant”.

The large numbers of animals required serves another important function. It is a reminder of what Job has lost in chapter 1, and points the reader/hearer to another dimension of Job’s restoration. By requiring the friends to find the animals demanded by God, the friends are required to move into Job’s community and to purchase animals from them. This ritual act is a fifth moment in Job’s restoration, for it draws the estranged community back towards Job. In this moment their participation is indirect, but it is nevertheless a form of participation in the restoration of Job.

⁹ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.

¹⁰ And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

¹¹ Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring (Job 42:9-11 NRSV).

What happens when the community witnesses God’s affirmation and the friends’ acknowledgement of their theological folly? What happens when the community is drawn, indirectly, into a renewed relationship with Job? The answer can be found in 42:11, where the restoration of Job is not miraculous or magical (though verse 10 is usually re-membered as

the end of the sub-unit, not verse 11), but involves the acceptance and support of the whole community.⁴⁷ The sixth moment of Job’s restoration is the direct restoration of a stigmatised Job to his community. The focus is not verse 10, as is so often the case in most appropriations of the book of Job. The focus is verse 11, for here we learn *how* God restores the fortunes of Job.

Job’s restoration to his community includes several steps, according to the slow repetitive syntactic movement of the text. They take the initiative and come to him. They re-incorporate him by eating with him. They identify themselves with him. They comfort him. They shift their theological frame. They each make an economic contribution to his recovery. The narrator signals the fundamental significance of the change in the community at the outset: “Those who had known him before”, the very same people that had stigmatised and shunned him (12:4; 16:10, 20-21; 17:1-16; 19:13-21; 29:1-30:15;), now “came to him” (v11). The shift is both theological and social. The shape of the text here shows the ordering of these shifts. As the community comes to grips with another theological perspective, so they are enabled to become a different kind of community.⁴⁸ The text is clear: there is another, contending, theological perspective to that of the friends. The theological frame within which they have lived has been shown to be just one theological perspective, not *the* theological perspective.⁴⁹ It cannot account for important dimensions of lived reality/experience.

The restoration of Job is social in the fullest sense. Just as theological perspectives shape social stigma, so theological perspectives shape social acceptance. Job is embraced for who he is. While his own personal journey with stigma has reconstituted him, teaching him things he could not have known otherwise,⁵⁰ in another sense he is the same person he was at the beginning. His community rejected this Job and now accepts this Job.

We should not miss the emphasis of the text on economic restoration. Stigma, the text teaches us, has an economic effect. Stigma has forced Job into a world where Sheol is his home, the Pit is his father, and the worm his mother and sister (Job 17:11-16). It is a world where dust and ashes are the reality, psychologically and economically. That the community who pushed him into this world should be the community who enables the restoration of his economic well-being is just.

The Contextual Bible Study

Drawing on the exegetical analysis described above and what we had learned from the previous two Job-based Contextual Bible Studies with Siyaphila participants, we have developed the following form (over a number of years and through several stages) for our Contextual Bible Study on chapter 42.

[Working together in one large group, the text is read and the first question is discussed.]

1. In the final chapter of the book of Job (chapter 42) we hear God speaking, first to Job and then to his friends. Listen to what God says to Job’s friends:

⁷ After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (NRSV).

What do you think God is saying here? In what ways has Job spoken ‘rightly’ of God? In what ways have Job’s friends not spoken ‘rightly’ of God? Share with your neighbour, and compare translations of this verse.

[The following input and the related questions are discussed in small groups of about 5-8 people, with opportunities for each small group to report back to the others after each question.]

2. Re-read Job 3:1-7 and Job 19:1-22. How does Job speak to and about God in these speeches?
3. Now re-read Job 42:7.

Input [read by a member or members of the small group, with a pause for reflection and discussion after each paragraph]: Here God affirms the resisting lament of Job and rejects the orthodox theology of his friends. Job's friends have each argued, with small variations, that Job is suffering because God is punishing him for some form of iniquity/sin. As Eliphaz puts it: "As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same" (Job 4:8 NRSV).

"What you sow you reap" was the traditional wisdom, but this quickly became distorted and inverted, ending up as "What you have reaped is a sign of what you have sowed". This is what Job's friends are arguing. Because they see Job suffering, their theology asserts that he must have sinned in some way to deserve this suffering.

But we as readers know that Job is righteous. The narrator says it, at the very beginning of the book: "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1 NRSV). And God says it: "The LORD said to [the] Satan [or messenger], 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil'" (Job 1:8 NRSV).

So there is no ambiguity; Job is righteous. His suffering is not the result of sin. In the theological 'world' of this biblical book, Job has not done anything to deserve this suffering. There are other perspectives on sin in other parts of the Bible that offer a different view, but for us to understand the contribution of this biblical book we must try to remain within its theological world.

Having initially accepted his suffering without complaint (1:21), after seven days and seven nights of silent reflection (2:13), he "opens his mouth" (3:1) in poetic lament, protesting and lamenting his suffering. He rejects the pious traditional theology of his friends and summons God to dialogue with him directly. Here and in Job 19 he has harsh things to say to and about both his friends and God!

And yet God goes on to affirm that Job has spoken 'rightly' to and about God!

But God does not stop here. God continues:

⁷ After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

⁸ Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done" (Job 42:7-8 NRSV).

Why do you think that God deals with the friends publically, both speaking to them publically and requiring them to perform public and communal acts?

4. Because the theology of the friends is also the dominant theology of Job’s wider community, Job is stigmatised by those who once respected him. They too believe that God is punishing Job for some kind of sin, so they avoid him. As Job says, “Surely now God has worn me out; he has made desolate all my company” (Job 16:7 NRSV). He remembers the days before he was sick, when God watched over him and the friendship of God was upon his home, when all in his community respected him (Job 29:1-12).

Why do people withdraw from those they believe God is punishing? More specifically, why does the family, the church, and the community withdraw from those that are HIV-positive (or those with a disability or those who are unemployed)?

5. When it becomes public knowledge that God is on Job’s side, and that God does not approve of the dominant theology of his friends, things change. We read:

⁹ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.

¹⁰ And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

¹¹ Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring (Job 42:9-11 NRSV).

How and in what ways is Job “restored”? Follow the logic of verse 11 carefully. According to verse 11, who restores Job and how? What are the various elements of his restoration to his community?

6. What theological resources does this chapter of Job (chapter 42) offer us in trying to help our families and our churches and our communities to be more redemptive and accepting places for people living with HIV?
7. What will you now do in appropriating these theological resources for your local church? Propose a specific plan of action.

Commentaries on the book of Job are legion. But the work of the socially engaged African biblical scholar is shaped as much by ordinary African readers of the Bible as it is by scholarly commentaries (most of which originate outside of Africa). So we continue to read Job with those who are HIV-positive and with the communities that still struggle to find a theology that will enable them to embrace and include those living with HIV.

This Bible study, like all Contextual Bible Study, is part of the cycle of praxis, and so is not finished or fixed. For example, in an earlier form of the study we had a specific question that dealt overtly with the notion that ‘evil’ comes from God. However, the various groups of people living with HIV with whom we work suggested that posing the question so starkly was not particularly helpful. So we settled with the form that is now Question 5, in which space is offered to groups to identify the detail in the text that is of significance to them. We also added opportunities to re-read Job 3 and Job 19:1-22, for we found that many of those doing this Contextual Bible Study on Job 42 had not participated in the earlier two Contextual Bible Studies. In this version of the Bible study we have experimented with some summary ‘input’ in Question 3. It seems to be useful, but also requires time for reflection and small group facilitation to work paragraph by paragraph and to keep the process moving.

One of the key creative challenges of constructing a Contextual Bible Study is to discern how ‘questions’ (including ‘input’ connected questions) might be used to capture and represent exegetical detail.⁵¹ An enduring challenge of Contextual Bible Study is to recognise

that the exegetical detail one chooses to offer is partial, in both senses of the word, but nevertheless to risk⁵² offering access to such partial detail and to trust the forms of appropriation that the participants will enact. So, it should be clear that the form of the Contextual Bible Study on Job 42 above has developed over a number of years and in a number of contexts. Each group of participants have journeyed with Job in different ways, bringing life to Job and to themselves.

“Senzeni na?” remains a question, for the book of Job does not resolve the relentless lamenting rhetoric that Job has enabled. What has changed is that Siyaphila support groups no longer experience the Bible as arrayed over against them. Job has become their (lamenting) companion and the Bible less condemnatory.

Conclusion

“A person is a person because of other people” is the core value of African society, and yet the stigma associated with HIV (and disability and unemployment)⁵³ has eaten away at us, devouring our communities.⁵⁴ But if God is for us, who can be against us? If it is clear to the families of those who are HIV-positive that God stands with the infected, how can the family cast/e them out?

The complexities of the ending of Job are legion. But there is clearly something here that is of use to those struggling to live positively with HIV.⁵⁵ In the Ujamaa Centre’s ongoing work with the Siyaphila support network and the biblical studies students who are drawn into our work, aspects of the ending of Job are recognised as a potential resource in the struggle for the restoration of family and community in midst of HIV and Aids. Difficulties with the text remain, for though we see God taking sides with the stigmatised, many of us remain troubled by the claim in verse 11 that it is this same God who brings “evil”⁵⁶ viruses upon us. But difficult as it is for most of us to imagine a God like this, at the very least we now stand (experientially and theologically puzzled) together in solidarity over against this God, rather than over against each other.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Madipoane Masenya, for example, argues that “it is pertinent”, given the position of women in post-apartheid South Africa “to add yet another line to the song”: “Isono sethu ubulili bethu besifazane (Our sin is our female sex?)” Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’ a Mphahlele), “An African-Conscious Female’s Reading of Steve Biko,” in *The Legacy of Stephen Bantu Biko: Theological Challenges*, editor Cornel W du Toit. Pretoria: Research Institute for Religion and Theology, 2008:114-15.
- ² Sisanda Mcimeli Nkoala, “Songs that Shaped the Struggle: A Rhetorical Analysis of South African Struggle Songs,” in *Rhetoric of Statecraft in Africa*, editor Philippe-Joseph Salazar, African Yearbook of Rhetoric. Cape Town: AfricaRhetoric Publishing, 2013:52.
- ³ Nkoala, “Songs That Shaped the Struggle,” 55.
- ⁴ Nkoala, “Songs That Shaped the Struggle,” 57.
- ⁵ Nkoala, “Songs That Shaped the Struggle,” 57.
- ⁶ Gerald O. West, “‘God Wants His People’: Between Retribution and Redemption in Trevor Makhoba’s Engagement with HIV and Aids,” *de arte* 81 (2010).
- ⁷ Mzwakhe Mbali, “Song of the Spirit,” in *Kwazulu-Natal* (MZ Music, 1996); Gerald O West, “The Poetry of Job as a Resource for the Articulation of Embodied Lament in the Context of HIV and Aids in South Africa,” in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, editor Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008.
- ⁸ UNAIDS, “The Gap Report,” (2014), http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/UNAIDS_Gap_report_en.pdf; Ayesha BM Kharsany *et al.*, “HIV Infection in High School Students in Rural South Africa: Role of Transmissions among Students,” *AIDS Research and Human Retroviruses* 30, no. 10 (2014); Ayesha BM Kharsany *et al.*, “HIV Prevalence among High School Learners – Opportunities for Schools-Based HIV Testing Programmes and Sexual Reproductive Health Services.” *BMC Public Health* 12:231 (2012).
- ⁹ This article honours Hendrik Bosman, whose careful scholarship and collegial engagement have enhanced my work, particularly my work on the book of Job.
- ¹⁰ For the latter see Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002; Grant LeMarquand, “A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa,” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, editor Gerald O West and Musa W. Dube. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000.
- ¹¹ Gerald O. West, “Sacred Texts, Particularly the Bible and the Qur’an, and HIV and Aids: Charting the Textual Territory,” in *Religion and HIV and Aids: Charting the Terrain*, editor Beverley G Haddad. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011. See also the extensive database: <http://chart.ukzn.ac.za/>
- ¹² Gerald O. West, “Newsprint Theology: Bible in the Context of HIV and Aids,” in *Out of Place: Doing Theology on the Crosscultural Brink*, editor Jione Havea and Clive Pearson. London: Equinox Publishing, 2011.
- ¹³ Gerald O West, “Reading the Bible in the Light of HIV/AIDS in South Africa,” *The Ecumenical Review* 55, no. 4 (2003).
- ¹⁴ Gerald O. West and Bongi Zengele, “Reading Job ‘Positively’ in the Context of HIV/Aids in South Africa,” *Concilium* 4 (2004).
- ¹⁵ Mbali, “Song of the Spirit.”
- ¹⁶ West, “The Poetry of Job as a Resource in the Context of HIV.”
- ¹⁷ West, “Newsprint Theology.”
- ¹⁸ See Gerald O. West and Bongi Zengele, “The Medicine of God’s Word: What People Living with HIV and Aids Want (and Get) from the Bible,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 125, 2006:62-63. ‘Siyaphila’ is an isiZulu word which means ‘we are well’, ‘we have life’.

- ¹⁹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006).
- ²⁰ West, “The Poetry of Job as a Resource in the Context of HIV.”
- ²¹ I have reflected on this in various ways in West, “The Poetry of Job as a Resource in the Context of HIV.”; Gerald O. West, “Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People Living with HIV,” in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth C Boase and Frechette Christopher G (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016); Gerald O West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Leiden and Pietermaritzburg: Brill and Cluster Publications, 2016:377-92).
- ²² See also Ken Stone, “Safer Text: Reading Biblical Laments in the Age of Aids,” *Theology and Sexuality* 10 (1999); Mona West, “The Gift of Voice, the Gift of Tears: A Queer Reading of Lamentations in the Context of Aids,” in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001); Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad and Madipoane Masenya, eds., *African Women, HIV/Aids and Faith Communities* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003); Johan H Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome of Silence: Finding Speech for Preaching in a Context of HIV and Aids,” *Scriptura* 96 (2007); Elochukwu Uzukwu, “Approaches to Liturgical Spirituality in Times of Diseases, Epidemics, and Distress,” in *HIV & Aids in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation*, ed. Jacquineau Azetop (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).
- ²³ One of my contributions as a biblical scholar within the work of the Ujamaa Centre is to discern biblical texts that might be of use to the communities we work with.
- ²⁴ David JA Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 1-20* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989:435).
- ²⁵ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 1-20*:457-358.
- ²⁶ John Riches et al., *What Is Contextual Bible Study? A Practical Guide with Group Studies for Advent and Lent* (London: SPCK, 2010:41).
- ²⁷ Ezra Chitando, *Living with Hope: African Churches and HIV/Aids 1* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007); Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy, eds., *Islam and Aids: Between Scorn, Pity, and Justice* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); West, “Sacred Texts and HIV and Aids.”
- ²⁸ David J.A. Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 1218-24. But see Kenneth Numfor Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the ‘Happy Ending’ in Job 42:7-17* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005:55, 128); Yohan Pyeon, *You Have Not Spoken What is Right about Me: Intertextuality and the Book of Job* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003:22-23); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991:86-87).
- ²⁹ Ellen van Wolde, “Job 42:1-6: The Reversal of Job,” in *The Book of Job*, ed. WAM Beuken (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994).
- ³⁰ David Clines encourages the reader not to read the difficult parts of the poetry in ways that are not ‘in character’ for Job; see Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 1-20*.
- ³¹ Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999:404-06).
- ³² Leo G Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991:233).
- ³³ Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 233.
- ³⁴ Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 234.
- ³⁵ Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 236.
- ³⁶ Carol A Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003:257).
- ³⁷ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42:1212*.
- ³⁸ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42:1212*.
- ³⁹ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42:1204-05*.
- ⁴⁰ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42:1218*.
- ⁴¹ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42:1212*.
- ⁴² There hints of this in Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 226, 32.
- ⁴³ Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 234.
- ⁴⁴ Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the ‘Happy Ending’ in Job 42:7-17*; Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42:1230*.
- ⁴⁵ Gerald O. West, “Exegesis Seeking Appropriation; Appropriation Seeking Exegesis: Re-Reading 2 Samuel 12:1-22 in Search of Redemptive Masculinities,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34, no. 2 (2013).
- ⁴⁶ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 38-42:1232*.

- ⁴⁷ For other aspects of this communal dimension see Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the ‘Happy Ending’ in Job 42:7-17*, 22, 97.
- ⁴⁸ Religious change preceded social change; Gerald O West, “Recovering the Biblical Story of Tamar: Training for Transformation, Doing Development,” in *For Better, for Worse: The Role of Religion in Development Cooperation*, ed. Robert Odén (Halmstad: Swedish Mission Council, 2016).
- ⁴⁹ We find a similar contestation in the book of Judith; see Helen Efthimiadis-Keith, “Genealogy, Retribution and Identity: Re-Interpreting the Cause of Suffering in the Book of Judith,” *Old Testament Essays* 27, no. 3 (2014).
- ⁵⁰ Elsa Tamez, “A Letter to Job,” in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, ed. John S Pobee and Bärbel von Wartemberg-Potter (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986).
- ⁵¹ Gerald O. West, “Deploying the Literary Detail of a Biblical Text (2 Samuel 13:1-22) in Search of Redemptive Masculinities,” in *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J.A. Cline*, ed. James K. Aitken, Jeremy M.S. Cline, and Christl M. Maier (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).
- ⁵² Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).
- ⁵³ Sibusiso Gwala, “The Impact of Unemployment on the Youth of Pietermaritzburg” (Master of Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007).
- ⁵⁴ The language of ‘eating’ is deliberate, for the common understanding of ‘witchcraft’ in African communities is that of being ‘eaten’; see Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, 2 vols., vol. One (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991:142-43); Anthony O. Balcomb, “Sex, Sorcery, and Stigma: Probing Some No-Go Areas of the Denial Syndrome in the Aids Debate,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 125 (2006); Heike Behrend, “The Rise of Occult Powers, Aids and the Roman Catholic Church in Western Uganda,” *Journal of Religion in Africa - Religion en Afrique* 37, no. 1 (2007).
- ⁵⁵ West, “Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People Living with HIV.”
- ⁵⁶ The narrator makes it clear that the source of this evil is God; see Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the ‘Happy Ending’ in Job 42:7-17*, 106.