CHAPTER THIRTEEN
READING THE BIBLE AMIDST THE HIV AND AIDS PANDEMIC IN BOTSWANA

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Introduction

HIV and AIDS has grievous consequences that are far reaching, affecting all spheres of life and as previous studies show, its effects are most felt in the developing world which includes the African continent.

In Africa, HIV and AIDS forms the context of doing Theology almost at every level. That is, there has been an increasing need to take a fresh look at the biblical data with the aim of reformulating its message in the light of this contemporary situation. This need has been expressed by many theologians from the continent as exemplified by Moji Ruele (2003:78–82) who purports that “we are challenged more than ever to show that God is indeed the God of life who conquered death through Jesus Christ”. In the same article, Ruele convincingly argues that a theology of life is one that is born out of a particular people’s prevailing conditions in a particular context.

It is clear therefore that my choice of contextual tools i.e., social location and reading with are in-line with the rest of African theology. Justin Ukpong (2000:23) in his description of African Theology maintains that in the developing world, in general contextual approaches to biblical interpretation are the most common. These are approaches that aim to establish a meaningful interaction between the reader and the text. This is to say, that doing biblical interpretation and indeed theology in Africa in general, means creating meaning that is both informed by the reader’s background and yet seeks to inform or even transform the reader’s immediate life experiences. This means that the reader’s experiences, both past and present, play a very important role in the creation of meaning of a text. The bible in this case is taken as an authoritative, life-packed text which has found a home in the life of its readership whose major role is to unpack this life
for themselves. This is done without denying who they are, where they are and where they are going to.

In as much as the bible affects the reader with its life-giving message, such will not be possible without the impact of the reader and her/his experiences in the meaning-creating process. For the same reasons mentioned above, I maintain in this essay that if the bible is to be of any significance at all in this era of HIV and AIDS it must necessarily be read in the light of and for the context of HIV and AIDS. This will allow God to speak to us through the bible, to address our need for comfort and meaning in the face of the unspoken despair resulting from the horrendous effects of the pandemic.

Biblical readers/interpreters, especially in Africa, are faced with the rather large responsibility of having to make an extra effort to discover and reclaim texts that will foster healing in this time when multitudes of people are desperately searching for wholeness and meaning in their lives. Healing here does not mean the total eradication of pain; rather that it refers to finding ways and means of establishing positive living despite suffering, hence achieving a more bearable state of life in the face of human degradation. This is possible if we are to look at the bible afresh with the aim of investing it with new meanings and nuances to meet the needs of our specific contexts and in this case HIV and AIDS. This call for contextual readings and interpretations of the bible has also been clearly expressed by Gerald West (1993:7) who recounts that:

God does speak to us in our contexts in various ways. The bible is clearly one of the ways in which God speaks to us; but we often cannot hear what God is saying because we think we already know what the bible says...we must be willing to return to the bible with open ears, eyes and hearts.

West therefore supports my argument that unless readers/interpreters allow for multiplicity and flexibility in terms of the meaning of scripture, then the bible becomes irrelevant. In other words, biblical reading and interpretation should be concerned more with relevance than with (so-called) objective truth. As readers/interpreters it is important therefore to acknowledge the fact we do not possess the ‘truth’ but rather are constantly seeking fresh revelations of God for us in our different and ever-changing contexts.

The central aim of this essay is an attempt to explain with illustrations, the importance of reading biblical stories, especially those of suffering and pain that culminate in healing and restoration, and