

Contending for Compassion in the Old Testament:

Reading the Old Testament in the Context of HIV/Aids

Gerald O. West

Head of School of Theology, University of Natal
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Introduction

I have made my opening point before (West 2003), but I will make it again because it is so important. I worry when well intentioned people who are not HIV-positive prescribe what kind of theology there ought to be or how we ought to read the Bible for people who are HIV-positive. The questions of how we read the Bible (specifically the Old Testament) in the context of HIV/Aids, the subject of my paper, must be substantially constituted by actual collaboration with people who are living with the virus. We are all affected, and we are all being partially constituted by the daily realities of HIV/Aids, but we are not all infected. Alongside the other liberation theologies that have shaped our African contexts – and I speak here specifically of liberation theologies that have centred around race, class, gender and culture – HIV/Aids must now take its place (see for example Maluleke 2001; Nicolson 2000). And what an HIV/Aids liberation theology demands is that we grant an epistemological privilege to the *experience* of those who are infected. Per Frostin is correct when he says that the distinguishing characteristic of liberation theologies is not content but methodology (Frostin 1988:11), and key to the methodology of liberation theologies is the epistemological privileging of those who experience that particular marginalisation. Those who know the lived reality of HIV/Aids, must become the primary interlocutors of theology (see Frostin 1988:6-11).

A personal story here will highlight this important point. At a tea-time discussion in the School of Theology at the University of Natal, where I teach, our conversation turned to the subject of Jesus' humanity and divinity (– tea-times in our School do sometimes generate serious theological discussion!). In this relaxed and somewhat experimental context I ventured to suggest that just as Jesus was claimed to be black by African American Black Theology and was claimed to be female by Feminist Theology, so a theology of HIV/Aids might claim the blood of Jesus to be HIV-positive. It seemed to me that such a claim would be in continuity with the similar theological claims of kindred struggles. A colleague, Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, who is HIV-positive, responded by saying that she felt uncomfortable with this, and she then went on to say how important theologically it was to her to see the blood of Jesus as not HIV-positive. She found hope in his HIV-negative blood (Zondi-Mabizela 2003; see also Byamugisha et al. 2002).

My second introductory point is related to the first. In the South African context lived realities are not unifocal; they are not about one 'issue'. Marginalisation in South Africa is historically intersected. Race, class, gender and culture are all factors in the epidemiology of the disease in our country. The hard work and careful analysis that has begun to generate a more contextually relevant theology must be sustained while we mainstream this 'new' thread, as we facilitate a mutually transformative dialogue among the epistemological realities of marginalisation in our context.

My third and final introductory comment is that any attempt to talk theology without at the same time being engaged in practical action for appropriate and holistic health (in the full sense of the word) care for those infected is obscene. Part of our task is to ensure suitable treatment for all and part of our task is to tackle stigma and discrimination. This article takes up the latter task.

It is against the background of these introductory remarks that I now provide a sketch of what it might mean to read the Old Testament in the context of HIV and Aids.

The texts positive people prefer

Taking my opening point seriously, I must confess that our experience in the Institute of the Study of the Bible and Worker Ministry Project (ISB&WM) in working with those who have tested positive for HIV and who have joined our Siyaphila support group is that they seem to prefer New Testament texts to Old Testament texts (West Forthcoming). Having said this, however, I should perhaps be more precise. What Bongzi Zengele-Nzimande's Bible study groups clearly show is a preference for texts in which Jesus stands with those whom society has marginalised. So it is not the New Testament as a whole that is found to be affirming of their human dignity, but particular texts within the New Testament. As research into the reading patterns of Africans indicates, African Christians may actually prefer the Old Testament (Ukpong 2000; Holter 2000). Again, this is perhaps not nuanced enough, for it is not the Old Testament as the Old Testament that is at issue, just as it is not the New Testament as the New Testament that is the issue for members of the Siyaphila support group. What is at issue is the lines of connection between the lived faith of African Christians and particular biblical texts. So, because much of the Old Testament resonates with the socio-religious realities of African Christians (Ukpong 2000), it is the Old Testament that forms the bulk of their favourite biblical passages. So too, because Jesus continually identifies with those whom society has marginalised, it is these New Testament texts that form strong lines of connection with the lived faith of people living with HIV/Aids.

To put it differently, the distinction between the testaments, a distinction that is inherited from western forms of Christianity and the encyclopaedic model of theological education in which

most of us were trained, is a false one in our African contexts. However, for the purposes of this article I will focus on the Old Testament.¹

Dominant theologies in the Old Testament

The Old Testament does present a problem to those living with HIV/Aids, because it appears to have such a clear dominant theology. This predominant theology is known as the theology of retribution, and closely related to this theology is its corollary theology, a theology that emphasises a God who is totally in control. Briefly, the theology of retribution argues that what a person sows, so will they reap. As the saying suggests, the metaphor for this form of theology comes from agriculture, and the saying (like the theology) probably has its origins in the early agricultural experience of ancient 'Israel' (Wittenberg 1991).² In a context in which each family had its tribal land, experience would generally show that those who worked diligently and hard would reap plentiful crops, while those who were lazy and neglectful of their land would suffer hardships. This reality of agricultural life was generalised into other aspects of community life. Given that God was in control of all spheres of life, the argument would go, and not just agriculture, those who lived good lives would reap goodness and those who lived bad lives would reap badness.

However, as Gunther Wittenberg has carefully argued, this community wisdom became distorted as the context changed. With the rise of the monarchy and centralised state, new pressures were brought to bear on the relatively settled and stable agricultural life of ordinary 'Israelites'. Before the monarchy, communities would have had to deal with some unpredictable external factors, such as drought, locusts, and invasions from neighbouring peoples (eg. the Philistines). While the monarchy brought with it security against 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 nations", the centralised 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! You sow, but others in addition to you and your family take and consume what you have produced. In other words, the experience of local 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 to live well because your resources were being taken by the centralised monarchic state to sustain itself.

1 This article is based on a paper I presented at a World Council of Churches Workshop on HIV/Aids, Stigma and Discrimination, Kempton Park, South Africa, November 2003. I was asked to present a paper on a theology of compassion in the Old Testament.

2 I place 'Israel' in inverted commas because I want to problematise our understanding of this term (see West 1998).

However, as Wittenberg shows, this change in experience did not lead to a change in theology, at least not initially. As we know, theological systems are slow to change! What happened is that the theology remained but became inverted. Before, when people worked diligently and hard it was generally accepted that they would reap the benefits of conforming to God's order. In order to sustain this theology of retribution under the new centralised monarchic system there was a shift in emphasis. Now those who showed signs of prosperity were assumed to have done what is right before God. Now, it was argued, what you reaped indicated what you had sown!

The problem with this theology, of course, is that those who prospered by unjust means were presumed to have lived justly. Many houses and full barns, fine clothes and livestock, and extravagant imported goods were seen by society as signs of God's blessing for a good life. Remarkably, even though there was clear evidence to contrary, this distorted theology of retribution endured. God, it was assumed, was in control, and so those who prospered must have pleased God by living according to God's order.

This kind of theology has little understanding of structural injustice, and those who have advocated it tend to be those who benefit from systemic privilege, be it the racial privilege of apartheid, the middle class privilege of capitalism, or the male privilege of patriarchy. What we now need to recognise is the devastating effects of this theology for people living with HIV/Aids.

Aids as a punishment from God

Given my analysis, it is not surprising that the predominant view in most Christian communities is that HIV/Aids is a punishment from God. That HIV is transmitted mainly by sex (in our context) only confirms this opinion. Further corroboration for this position is found, according to Habbakuki Lwendo, from aspects of African Religion (Lwendo 2000).

There is no doubt that this is the dominant theology that people living with HIV/Aids encounter in our South African society, both in and outside the church. They bear in their bodies God's punishment for their sins, particularly their sexual sins.

It is at this point that the Old Testament, or parts of it, interrupt this theology. The book of *Job* is an excellent example.³ In the prose prologue we enter a world in which the theology of retribution is taken seriously. Job, we are told, was not only himself "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1), but he would also "send and sanctify" his sons and daughters after they had feasted, rising "early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts'" (1:5, NRSV). Job's health and wealth, and the health and wealth of

³ For some other attempts to read the book of *Job* in the context of HIV/Aids see (Stiebert 2001; Masenya 2001).

his sons and daughters, it is implied, is directly related to Job's righteous life. The theology of retribution holds.

The story then becomes complicated, particularly for the reader, who is privy to the heavenly debate between God and his colleague, the Satan (1:6-12). Job, however, is unaware of the heavenly wager, and so lives out his theological understanding, accepting the principle of retribution, so much so that he can say, having experienced the loss of his livestock and servants, the destruction of his property and the death of all of his children, and his own deteriorating health – after all this, he can say, “the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21). Even the compassionate call of his wife to put an end to his suffering: “Do you still persist in your integrity [ie. your theology]? Curse God, and die” (2:9), is met with an affirmation of God's control: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10)

Job, it would appear, accepts “the bad” from God, remaining silent, refusing to “sin with his lips” (2:10) by questioning God or this theology. As he silently sits his friends come among him, to “console and comfort him” (2:11). And we know what they will say; they will each explain to him how he must have sinned in some sense, for how else can he explain his suffering. By looking at the destroyed and diseased Job they can tell that God must be punishing him in some way for something he has done – this is how their theology works.

But before they can say anything, and to their credit they do not immediately ‘counsel’ Job, Job speaks. Having earlier refused to “sin with his lips” he now lets rip! Prose is no longer adequate for what Job is about to say, and so the text shifts into poetry. This shift is more than a shift from prose to poetry, however, it is also a shift in theology!

Let the day perish in which I was born,
and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived’.
Let the day be darkness!
May God above not seek it or shine on it.
Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds settle upon it;
let the blackness of the day terrify it.
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.
Yes, let that night be barren;
let no joyful cry be heard in it.
Let those curse it who curse the Sea,

those who are skilled to arouse up Leviathan.
Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none;
may it not see the eyelids of the morning –
because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
and hide trouble from my eyes.

Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?
Why were there knees to receive me,
or breasts for me to suck?
Now I would be lying down and quiet;
I would be asleep;
then I would be at rest
with kings and counsellors of the earth
who rebuild ruins for themselves,
or with princes who have gold,
who fill their houses with silver.

Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child,
like an infant that never sees the light?
There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest.
There the prisoners are at ease together;
they do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.
The small and the great are there,
and the slaves are free from their masters.

Why is light given to one in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul,
who long for death, but it does not come,
and dig for it more than for hidden treasures;
who rejoice exceedingly,
and are glad when they find the grave?
Why is light given to one who cannot see the way,
whom God has fenced in?
For my sighing comes like my bread,
and my groanings are poured out like water.

Truly the thing I fear comes upon me,
and what I dread befalls me.
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest; but trouble comes (3:3-26).

Here is the beginnings of another theology; here is a cry of rage and pain; here is an incipient and inchoate theology. Here is an attempt to undo what God did in Genesis 1! God says, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3); Job counters with, "Let the day be darkness!" (for further discussion see Clines 1989: 67-105; and Gutierrez 1991:7-10). Here Job struggles with how to speak of God – how to do theology – in the context of immense suffering and loss. Would that we read this text at the countless funerals of our people who are dying of Aids. Would that Job 3:3-26 would be read rather than Job 1:21: "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord".

This article is not the place for an HIV-positive reading of this text, though this text perhaps calls for such a reading. All I want to do here is to point to the emergence of a counter theology to the dominant theology of retribution. Job is contending with that theology, not yet sure what new theology will be born from the pain of his loss. Job's attempt at a new theology places the diseased human at the centre, and not a theological system. No matter how much his friends reiterate and rephrase the theology of retribution, Job refuses to comply; he refuses to embrace a theology that refuses to embrace his pain. Job's sustained refusal is significant for a theology of compassion, for in formulating each of his refusals he takes a stand and a theological step against stigma and discrimination. In his reflections on the discourses of Job's friends, Rene Girard ...

In fact, Job refuses to be quiet until he can deal directly with God, and God does not disappoint, but comes to dialogue with Job face-to-face (38-41). Significantly, though I cannot go into detail here (but see Perdue 1991:196-240), one way of reading the God speeches is to see them shifting the focus from a theology of God's total control to a theology of God's contending for control. While many of the images do reflect a God who is in control, others reflect a God who is struggling to control.

However we read the God speeches, what is clear is that when we return to the prose ending God has taken sides with Job against Job's friends, asserting that: "My wrath is kindled against you ... for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7).

Here then is a valuable lesson from the Old Testament: the theology of retribution is not the final word; there are other more compassionate theologies that are struggling to be articulated, and which embrace the real pain of those who suffer.

Contending theologies

This lesson is a particularly valuable one because it does two things; it humbles us before the Bible and it destabilises the Bible. We should now be more circumspect before proclaiming: ‘The Bible says ...’. And it is not the book of *Job* alone that incorporates contending theologies. In a series of articles, Walter Brueggeman argues that there are two major contending theological themes or trajectories that run through the Bible, even though they may change their form as they find expression in different socio-historical contexts (Brueggemann 1992, 1992, 1993). The power of Brueggemann’s proposal is that what characterises each trajectory is its connection to a particular socio-historical experience. These theologies, like all theologies, do not have a life of their own somewhere in the air, but are each rooted in specific socio-historical realities.

The two trajectories Brueggeman discerns are the “Mosaic liberation” trajectory and the “royal consolidation” trajectory (Brueggemann 1993). These two contending trajectories can be traced through each of the socio-historical periods of Israel. The Mosaic liberation theological trajectory emerges as the theological response of peasants to the theology of the Canaanite city-states and is the founding faith of early, premonarchic, ‘Israel’. The Mushite priesthood of Shiloh and Nob during the united monarchy, the prophets during the divided monarchy, the Deuteronomists during the exile (before their theology hardened and became inflexible), the visionaries from the displaced Levitical priesthood during the postexilic period, and a variety of other voices that cry out on behalf of the poor and marginalised stand in continuity with this trajectory of theology and give it new articulations in their respective contexts.

The royal consolidation theological trajectory finds its first ‘Israelite’ articulation during the united monarchy of David and Solomon in a range of ways, including the ideology underlying the transition from a communal tribal society to a centralized city-state system, the Aaronid priesthood of Hebron and Jerusalem, and the institutions of the monarchy. This trajectory continues in the theology of the Priestly writer, in the postexilic Zadokite priesthood, and in a number of other sectors of the privileged and powerful, wherever the dominant concern is to consolidate and to control.

We can summarize the trajectories or traditions as follows. The Mosaic tradition, or what *The Kairos Document* (Kairos 1986) speaks of as “Prophetic theology”, “tends to be a movement of protest which is situated among the disinherited and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who decisively intrudes, even against seemingly impenetrable institutions and orderings”. In tension, and contending, with this trajectory, the Davidic tradition, or what *The Kairos Document* refers to as “Church theology”,⁴ “tends to be a movement of consolidation

⁴ Brueggemanns’ Davidic trajectory contains elements of both “Church theology” and “State theology”. For Brueggemann there are only two trajectories, not three as in *The Kairos Document*. Given our new secular state, Brueggemann’s two trajectories probably makes more sense in our current context. I have discussed Brueggemann’s work with reference to *The Kairos Document* more fully in another article (West 2000), which has

which is situated among the established and secure and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who faithfully abides and sustains on behalf of the present ordering” (Brueggemann 1993:202).

These trajectories do not stop, of course, at the end of the Old Testament; they can be tracked through the New Testament as well. The royal, Davidic, consolidation trajectory, whose dominant purpose is structure legitimation (Brueggemann 1992), can be discerned in the theology of the temple leadership as narrated by Mark (11:27-13:2). The chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians defend the status quo and legitimate law and order. However, Jesus, standing as he does in the Mosaic liberation trajectory, whose main aim is to embrace the pain of those excluded and exploited by the temple-state system, subjects the dominant theology of structure legitimation to sharp critique (see Brueggemann 1992).

What is particularly helpful about Brueggemann’s proposal is that it illuminates “the various alternatives in current theological discussion” (Brueggemann 1993:217). Unfortunately, the dominant theological trajectory of the missionaries and colonialism is the royal, Davidic, consolidation trajectory, where control and structure legitimation are the key concepts. This is the theological trajectory that we in (South) Africa have inherited and which we perpetuate in our churches. We may tinker with it, but it remains substantially intact. It is little wonder, then, that the church is unable to embrace with compassion the pain of those living with HIV and Aids.⁵

Having said this, however, clearly there are aspects of the structure legitimation theological trajectory – Church theology – that are important for our human well being. This theological trajectory “is an assertion of creation theology, the sense that the world is ordered and governed. The world is not chaos; it is not endlessly pliable; it is not yet to be decided. There is an ordered quality to life that will not be mocked. No one is able to fashion a private order according to one’s own selfish yearning. There is a transcendent mystery before which everyone must answer, sooner or later” (Brueggemann 1992:16). “This theology provides an ordered sense of life that is lodged in the sovereignty of God, beyond the reach of historical circumstance. It is a way of speaking about God’s nonnegotiable governance” (Brueggemann 1992:22). And, Brueggemann goes on to argue, it “is precisely this fundamental conviction that lets social life exist, that permits a measure of humanness, that lets us set limits on our common beastliness, that lets us nurture our children in decency, and that lets there be some public planning and continuity of policy” (Brueggemann 1992:16). Furthermore, this theological trajectory “satisfies

some relevance to the discussion in this article.

⁵ Brueggemann uses the phrase ‘structure legitimation’ to characterize the royal theological trajectory and the phrase ‘the embrace of pain’ to characterize the liberation trajectory. Neither my argument nor his depends on this terminology; we may have to construct our own terms in analysing the two trajectories in our context.

a religious yearning by an affirmation of providence. Not only does God govern, but there is an order that works through the processes of history, even if that purpose is not always visible” (Brueggemann 1992:22).

But, and this is a big ‘but’, this theology of moral coherence is open to exploitation and tends to serve the ruling classes in both church and society, who “regularly identifies the order of creation with the current social arrangement” (Brueggemann 1992:22). “Every theological claim about moral rationality is readily linked to a political claim of sovereignty and a political practice of totalitarianism”. While Brueggemann recognises that this linkage need not be so, that there is no necessity for such a connection, he argues that creation theology regularly and readily “becomes imperial propaganda and ideology”. So when the order of life is celebrated, the ruling classes use the occasion to affirm the dominant social system.

The political order may be derived from, reflect and seek to serve the cosmic order, but derivation is so easily, readily, and frequently inverted that the cosmic order becomes a legitimation for the political order, and so there is a convenient match (often regarded as an ontological match) between God’s order and our order. What starts as a statement about *transcendence* becomes simply *self-justification*, self-justification made characteristically by those who preside over the current order and who benefit from keeping it so (Brueggemann 1992:16-17).⁶

The key question, then, facing any theology that claims to be in continuity with ‘Israel’s’ founding faith and the ministry of Jesus is the question of pain. A theology of consolidation and control has no place for the pained and the pain-bearers – the poor, the infected, the unemployable, the disabled, and the other marginal ones; indeed, the very presence of pain-bearers “is a silent refutation of the legitimated structures”. Within the theological frameworks of ecclesiastical authorities, therefore, “visible pain-bearers must be denied legitimacy as well as visibility because they assert that the legitimated structures are not properly functioning” (Brueggemann 1992:19). Our challenge is to contend with such theologies and to provide resources for recovering and reconstructing the other trajectory that is a part of our biblical heritage – the theological trajectory that embraces pain and that works for liberation and life for all. Our challenge is also to construct ecclesiastical structures that maintain the visibility and so the dignity of the pain-bearers.⁷

6 Of course, what is said here of political institutions and power can be said of ecclesiastical power and of the church as institution.

7 For a theoretically and theologically astute attempt at charting how we might go about constructing such structures see (Cochrane 1999). For a first pass at this see (Cochrane and West 1993).

Brueggemann's careful scholarship shows that alongside the more familiar theology of control and retribution is a less well-known theology of compassion. A careful reading of the Old Testament, and here biblical studies training can be a useful ally, recovers this neglected theological strand. Indeed, when we read the Old Testament in solidarity with those who are living with HIV and Aids we find this theological trajectory in the most unlikely places.

Theologies of control versus theologies of compassion

I conclude my paper with just one example of this. The story of David's rise to power, the consolidation of his kingship, and the establishment of David's dynasty are told in the Samuel and Kings. The narrative as we have it in our Bibles is broken, however, at the end of 2 Samuel 20, with David's army subduing a potential rebellion from the northern tribes led by Sheba, son of Bichri, a Benjaminite (like Saul, incidentally). Chapters 21-24, which form the final part of the books of Samuel, are a series of unrelated fragments. The narrative about David and the succession of Solomon (after much bloodshed and betrayal and rape) continues in 1 Kings 1. Samuel 21-24, in other words, interrupt the narrative flow of the story, and for this reason are seldom read. They were probably inserted into the text at this point because they were textual fragments to do with David's reign, but which easily lend themselves to being integrated into the larger narrative.

Sunday School stories of David, and church sermons about David, tend to skip these fragments (and some of the episodes in the main story, particularly those dealing with rape), and yet it is precisely in such unlikely places that we can find profound theologies of compassion. The fragment that has possessed me every since I first read it in a Bible study group is the first, 2 Samuel 21:1-14. Again, I cannot go into detail here (but see West 2003 reprint:142-157; and also Njoroge 2001), but I will briefly show its potential for a theology of compassion, not only for the living but also for the dead.⁸

The story begins with the narrator telling us that there has been a famine in the land for three years, after which "David inquired of the Lord" as to why this was the case. Quite why David took so long is not tackled, but the attentive reader, I am sure, is expected to note this time lag. God replies rather briefly, saying that "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house because he put the Gibeonites to death" (1). David is left to interpret this statement and to act, and act he does. He summons the Gibeonites and asks how he may make things right with them. They at first demur, saying that it is not their prerogative as a minority people in David's kingdom to claim either blood or money as retribution. David, refusing to take up the latter option as one

⁸ The research of Quarraisha Abdool Karim shows that while infection rates (though still high) are stabilising, mortality rates are rising rapidly. Death, therefore, is something the churches and society will have to deal with increasingly in the next decade (cited in Haddad 2003). Pastoral care will have to adapt to this shift (see Bate 2003; Kgosikwena 2001; Ward 2000) as will burial societies (see Ngwenya 2001).

might expect, opts instead to insist that they state their preference. They then do, asking for blood in the form of seven sons of Saul's family to be handed over to them so that they can "impale [or slaughter] them before the Lord [Yahweh] at Gibeon on the mountain of the Lord [Yahweh]" (6).

David immediately agrees, whether out of agreement with their theology of retribution, or respect for their autonomy, or as a way of ridding himself of potential claims to his throne from Saul's family. So, David takes six named sons from Saul's family and the Gibeonites impale them before God (and the text is clear that the God being referred to here is Yahweh). Their theology is clear, and so it seems is the theology of David. It is a theology of control and retribution.

Fortunately, however, the story does not stop here, for we read in verse 10 that "Rizpah the daughter of Aiah [who has had two sons impaled, see verse 8] took sackcloth, and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of the harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens; she did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies by day, or the wild animals by night". Here is a remarkable, though silent, theology of compassion. Rizpah silently sits with the victims of violence and control, taking her stand (while sitting) against the theology of the Gibeonites and her accomplice king, David. She sits until God sees her silent testimony and answers with rain from heaven. She sits until David is shamed by her silent witness and her counter theology and until he provides a proper burial for the dead (11-14). Hers is a silent, yet to be articulated, theology in solidarity with the dead.

The final sentence of verse 14 is a telling one, for it forces us to declare our preferred theological tradition. The verse reads, literally in the Hebrew, "God heeded supplications for the land, after that". What is the "that" that is being referred to here? Is it the theology (and its outworking) of David and the Gibeonites, or is the theology (and its outworking) of Rizpah? You decide!

Conclusion

There are, I have argued, resources in the Old Testament for a theology of compassion. These are profound resources and we would do well to harness them, though this requires hard and careful work. Like Job and the God of the book of *Job*, we have to struggle to bring a new order into being. Order in itself, as Bruggemann has shown, is not a bad thing. But it must be an order that embraces pain. Indeed, the challenge we face in the context of HIV/Aids is to construct theological and ecclesiastical systems that place the dignity of those suffering at their very centre. Any impulse to push the pain of those living positively to the periphery must be resisted, and there are plenty of biblical resources with which to resist.

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