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Chapter Two

Lessons on Healing from Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-27): An African-American Perspective

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Introduction

The fact that black people are affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic is well known. However, it is not widely recognized that the black people affected are in the Diaspora as well as in Africa. Consequently, a perspective from the Diaspora should be included in a discussion of the impact of HIV/AIDS on black people. To serve that purpose, this paper addresses the HIV/AIDS crisis in the African-American context and the issues it raises for this black community and "the black church."[1]

The basic premise of this paper is that the HIV/AIDS pandemic presents people of African descent with challenges that would have been unimaginable just a few decades ago. In order to deal with this crisis more effectively, the Bible must be interpreted in new ways in these changed circumstances. As a result, in this study, the story of the healing of Naaman, found in 2 Kings 5: 1-27, will be interpreted from not one but three different hermeneutical perspectives so that the possible meanings of the text for the African-American community today can be explored more fully.

Given the importance of the Church in the African-American community, the Bible must be interpreted with an awareness of both the theological implications of the biblical text and the social location of the community within which the text is read. Until recently, theological considerations and the context of faith communities were not factors in scholarly analysis of a text. At an earlier point in time, analysing a biblical text meant using historical-critical methods. The interpretive paradigm for historical criticism privileged the author and the author's world in determining a text's meaning.[2] Correspondingly, a distinction was made between exegesis and eisegesis. Exegesis, drawing meaning out of the text, was good and dictated "objectivity" on the part of the scholar who merely sought to draw out the meaning intended by the original author; eisegesis was bad because, presumably, the scholar "read into" the text. Eisegesis and its negative connotation assumed that the interpretive process is tainted if the scholar's theological interests or accountability to a community of faith are taken into account.

In recent decades, those traditional distinctions between exegesis and eisegesis have been challenged. In the introduction to his book, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture,* Stephen Fowl mentions that there is now a return to the understanding that biblical studies should not be separated from theology or from the life of faith communities (Fowl:xii-xxx). Similarly, in the first volume of the New Interpreter's Bible, published in 1995, there are articles on "reading the Bible" as women, African-Americans, Native Americans, and so forth, where the connections between biblical texts, theology and communities of faith are expressly made (Keck:150-188). Because these same connections between Scripture and community will be made in my analysis of the story of Naaman, found in 2 Kings 5:1-27, my approach in this paper is consistent with this newer trend in most respects. There is, however, one significant difference.

Instead of using only one hermeneutical approach, three different approaches will be utilized to interpret Naaman's story. Each hermeneutical approach will be discussed based

on its conceptualisation of the locus of a text's meaning. Specifically, the same text will be examined for meaning that is located in front of the text (within the faith community today), in the text (a literary analysis) and behind the text (redaction and transmission history).[3] My contention is that biblical texts must be fully explored – in new and creative ways – if we are to receive the guidance we need to handle the matters before our communities. Engaging a text in this manner will demonstrate that a text's meaning changes not only according to the method used but also according to the hermeneutical understanding with which one begins to study it. Moreover, we will see that new meanings emerge as the various interpretations derived from these different paradigms are put into conversation with one another. These meanings, derived from different hermeneutical discourses on the same text, are of vital importance if we are to challenge the Church's present use of the Bible in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. The study will begin with a brief summary of the biblical text and a description of the interpretive context, the presence of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community.

The Text: 2 Kings 5:1-27[4]

Naaman, a successful commander of the Aramean (Syrian) army, suffered from leprosy.[5] The Arameans had taken a young girl from Israel during one of their raids against the Israelites and the girl now served Naaman's wife. The young girl tells Naaman's wife that there is a prophet in the Israelite capital city of Samaria who could cure his condition. Presumably, Naaman's wife tells her husband about this prophet. Naaman then goes to the king of Aram and tells him what the Israelite girl has said. When Naaman leaves for Israel, he has a letter with him that his king is sending to the king of Israel. Upon receiving the letter from Naaman, the Israelite king panics. He mistakenly thinks that he is being asked in the letter to heal Naaman himself and since he cannot do that, he is afraid that the Aramean king is

merely trying to use his failure to act as a reason to declare war against the Israelites.

Elisha, the man of God, hears about the Israelite king's situation and offers to help. Naaman and his entourage go to Elisha's house but Elisha does not come out of his house. Instead, he sends a messenger to speak with Naaman. The message is that Naaman should wash in the Jordan river seven times and his flesh will be restored to normal. Naaman is angered by what he considers to be a breech of protocol – the prophet did not even come out to greet him and Naaman has been given a task that is ridiculously simple to do. He is ready to abandon the whole idea but his servants convince him that, because he would have been willing to do something difficult, he should be willing to do something easy. Naaman agrees with his servants, immerses himself in the Jordan seven times, and his skin is restored, becoming like that of a young boy.

Naaman returns to Elisha and says to him "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel," and he offers presents to Elisha but Elisha refuses to accept them. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, resents the fact that Naaman has not paid for his healing and feels that Elisha has "let him off too lightly." When Naaman is on his way back home, Gehazi catches up with him and, under false pretenses, obtains silver and clothing from Naaman. Gehazi keeps the goods for himself. When Elisha questions him about his activities, Gehazi denies that anything has happened. Elisha disapproves of Gehazi's actions and punishes Gehazi by declaring that Naaman's leprosy will cling to Gehazi and his descendants forever. At the end of the story, Gehazi's skin is leprous, as white as snow.

The Context: HIV/AIDS in the African-American Community

AIDS is now the leading cause of death for African-Americans between the ages of 25 and 44.[6] The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) provides the following statistics

on its website, based on data gathered through December 2000, the last year for which statistics are available:

- African-Americans represented only 12% of the population of the United States but constituted almost 38% of all AIDS cases reported.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of all women reported with AIDS were African-American.
- African-American children represented almost two-thirds (65%) of all reported pediatric AIDS cases.
- In the year 2000 alone, nearly half of all AIDS cases reported were among African-Americans.[7]

Among African-American males, the highest proportion of reported cases since the epidemic began is found with men who have sex with males (37%). The second and third most common exposure categories for African-American males are injection drug use (34%) and heterosexual activity (8%). For African-American females, the largest exposure category is injection drug use (41%) and heterosexual contact (38%). The same CDC website identifies 3 interrelated factors as the prevention challenges that face the African-American community: "the continued health disparities between economic classes, the challenges related to controlling substance abuse, and the intersection of substance abuse with the epidemic of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases."[8] Specifically, sharing needles and trading sex for drugs were mentioned as two of the ways in which sex partners and their children were put at risk for HIV/AIDS. The broader context of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community, however, includes the lack of health care and education, homelessness, poverty, racism, and sexism (Cohen:345).

The black church is a significant factor in the life of the African-American community. There are from 65,000 to 75,000 black churches of various denominations in the United States and this estimate does not include independent "storefront churches" that do not belong to any major denomination.[9] Similarly, 84% of African American adults who responded to a national survey described themselves as religious with 71% reporting that

they attended church regularly (Cohen: 278).[10] For the most part, however, the black church has failed to respond aggressively to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The reason cited most often for this failure is the church's conservative moral norms that lead it to oppose needle-exchange programs for drug users and to condemn homosexuality. One scholar who has studied the black community's relative inaction on the issue of HIV/AIDS sums up well the task ahead:

> We must not lose sight of the fundamental obstacle to the church's wholehearted response to AIDS: its adherence to or reliance on a strict Christian code which views behavior that transmits the virus as immoral and sinful. Thus, until church leaders are ready to discuss issues of sexuality, drug use, and homosexuality in an inclusive and transformed discourse, their ability to serve the entire community as well as to confront, instead of replicate, dominant ideologies will be severely inhibited (Cohen: 285).

Lessons Learned in Front of the Text

In this section of the paper, the theological implications of Naaman's story are uncovered from the hermeneutical perspective of "flesh and blood" readers in the contemporary context – the African-American community as it encounters the HIV/AIDS epidemic. From the perspective of the black community, Naaman's story clearly provides a sense of comfort. It demonstrates that, through God, a condition that is dreaded and feared can be healed. The parallels between leprosy in that ancient setting and AIDS in today's setting are obvious. Moreover, this healing power was made available to an Aramean, a non-Israelite. Not only are Arameans outsiders, they have been the Israelites' enemy. In fact, in the very next chapter, 2 Kings Chapter 6, the Arameans have Samaria, the Israelite capital, under siege. For African-Americans who have been marginalized and labelled "Other" by the dominant culture, a story about the healing of an outsider – even an enemy – is especially uplifting.

The story of this healing miracle, however, is problematic for two different reasons. First, in the context of the AIDS crisis, it describes a cure at a time when no such cure exists for individuals living with AIDS. One way to read narratives about healing miracles is to interpret individual healing in a different way so that it means spiritual and emotional wholeness rather than physical healing (Dube 2002).[11] Another way to read these narratives is to direct communal efforts against the societal ills that accompany and aggravate the HIV/AIDS crisis: ignorance, poverty, sexism, and homophobia. From this perspective, "healing" means that, although an individual cannot be cured, the related social ills can be cured.

Second, the story has a tendency to tell outsiders that they should become like those in the dominant culture. In the beginning of the story, we are told that Naaman is a successful military leader because "the Lord had given victory to Aram" (2 King 5:1). God was at work in Naaman even though Naaman did not know it. In other words, it describes a universalizing God who can be used to eliminate any other types of religious and cultural practices. That underlying message becomes explicit in the story because after his healing, Naaman goes to Elisha and says to him, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15). In other words, Namaan abandons the deity of his culture and adopts that of the Israelites. For people of African descent who have had to struggle to maintain distinctive cultural identities and traditions, the underlying message that there is only one way to worship, a way that is defined by those who otherwise marginalize us, should prompt some questioning of the text.

In contemporary settings, postcolonial analysts raise such questions about the relationship between dominant and marginalized communities. A postcolonial analysis attempts to identify those features of the biblical text that contribute to the cultural and economic imperialism carried out by the West. Postcolonial analysis identifies particular biblical passages that have been used by European Christians to exercise dominion over the world and this passage surely would be one of them (Dube 1998:118-134). In today's

context, the story could be construed to suggest that outsiders, black people, should be Christian and, once Christian, they should worship God in the same way that white people, the dominant group, worships God. Historically, the West's evangelistic effort among African peoples has communicated that message, yet that message has been resisted as African peoples on the continent and in the Diaspora have found different ways to express their spirituality and their lives of faith.

Even though the text clearly has colonizing tendencies, grounds for resistance are found when the text is placed within a broader canonical context. For example, any claim that a particular group is privileged is countered by Jesus' use of Naaman's story in Luke 4:27. As the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann points out, Jesus referred to the healing of Naaman when he preached in Nazareth, and in so doing Jesus recognized (and, parenthetically, we should recognize, too) that "the healing power of God has no boundary according to us or to our kind" (Brueggemann 2001:59). Furthermore, it is significant that Naaman was healed in the narrative before he made the faith affirmation. Believing in the God of the Israelites was not a precondition for helping a person in need. Correspondingly, the African-American community can assert that the dominant culture must recognize that outsiders to that dominant culture can participate in God's healing grace. Given the context of the AIDS crisis, though, the African-American community also needs to recognize that the same healing grace is available to those within the community who are considered to be outsiders by their own members. In other words, as black people, we should not be denied healing because we are different from the dominant group and those within our group should not be denied healing because they are different from us because of class, gender, or sexual orientation.

Lessons Learned in the Text

The most striking feature of Naaman's healing miracle is that he had to take a risk and do things that he would not have done under normal circumstances. In other words, he did not let pride, fear, or prejudice keep him from being healed. For healing to occur, Naaman had to cross five different boundaries in order to be healed: age, class, gender, nationality, and religion. These boundaries are significant enough, when applied to the present crisis in the African-American community, that detailed attention is warranted for each one.

Age

Naaman's healing miracle was set in motion by a young Israelite girl whom the Arameans had taken captive during one of their raids against Israel. To start the healing process, Naaman, a mighty military officer, had to pay attention to the words of a young girl, someone whom he would have ignored ordinarily. After the healing, Naaman's skin is described as that of a "young boy" which parallels the description of the Israelite as a "young girl" (2 Kings 5:2, 14). In this way, the text makes a connection between two individuals from opposite social positions. After the healing, the Syrian commander and the captive Israelite girl are alike.

In today's setting, Naaman's recognition of the young girl has additional significance. Just as Naaman paid attention to this young person, adults in the African-American community must pay attention to the state of our young people. As mentioned earlier, nearly two-thirds of all pediatric AIDS cases involve African-American children. Similarly, poverty and racism, factors that contribute to the spread of AIDS, have contributed also to the increased numbers of African-American children in the foster care system (Roberts 2002). Clearly, healing in our community must begin by responding to the plight of our children.

Gender and class

In the story, Naaman heeded the words of not just one but two females – the young Israelite girl and his own wife. Furthermore, he heeded the words of someone from a different socio-economic class not just once but twice. The young Israelite girl was a servant in Naaman's household and she began his journey toward healing. Then, when he resented being told to do something simple – immersing himself in the Jordan – his servants persuaded him to comply.

Therefore, crossing the boundaries of sexism, the marginalization of women, and classism, the marginalization of the poor, also must occur for healing to take place.

In her study of the failure of HIV/AIDS to be identified as a "black issue" by community leaders, Cathy Cohen found that there has been the notion of "a shared consciousness and linked fate" in the African-American community but that the notion can no longer be maintained. Instead, she finds that there is a privileging of the concerns of some segments of the African-American population over others (Cohen: 10-11). To illustrate her point, she cites the community support Clarence Thomas received, during his confirmation hearings in United States Senate, when he alleged racist treatment and the simultaneous subordination of Anita Hill's concerns about gender inequities (Cohen: 12-13). Similarly, when Cohen analysed coverage on AIDS in major African-American publications such as *Jet, Ebony and Essence*, she found that the articles were framed from the perspective of middle-class heterosexuals and rarely mentioned gay men or injection drug-users (Cohen:248). Given Cohen's findings, black leadership's silence on the issue of AIDS is predictable. That silence results from the impressions that HIV/AIDS affect the poor, women, drug addicts and gays – groups that are marginalized within the community – and whose issues do not dominate public discussions. Yet, as Naaman learned, healing cannot occur unless traditional boundaries of gender and class are ignored and the voices of those we have labelled "Other" are heard.

Nationality

Naaman was an Aramean, a Syrian, and a military leader from whose perspective the Israelites would have been "the enemy." Yet, to seek healing, he was willing to go into their territory. All too often, from the African-American perspective, the dominant white culture, including the medical establishment, is considered to be "the enemy." The Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932-1972) – in which four hundred Southern black men were not told that they had syphilis and were not treated by public health officials so that those officials could study the progression of the disease – has not been forgotten (Townes: 81-106; Cohen: 26). In a 1990 New York Times survey, referred to by Cohen, nearly one-third of black New Yorkers believed that it was true or might be true that the "virus which causes AIDS was deliberately created in a laboratory in order to infect black people" (Cohen: 25-26). Concerning the drug abuse that is associated with HIV/AIDS, allegations can be heard among the people that "white people brought drugs into the community" (Cohen: 6).[12]

Given the systematic mistreatment of people of African descent, these suspicions and general mistrust are probably warranted. The problem is simply that, even if these allegations were true, our ability to blame another group does not absolve us from a responsibility to act against the pandemic in as many ways as possible. Such action is warranted even if it means moving into the foreign and possibly hostile territory of the enemy – whether that enemy is of a different nationality, as in the context of the biblical narrative, or the same nationality (a citizen of the United States) but a different race, as in the context of African-Americans today.

Religion

When Naaman left Syria to go to Israel, he was venturing into the land of a people of a different religion as well as a different nationality. After his healing, Naaman tells Elisha that he will worship the Israelite god exclusively from then

on and he asks for two mule-loads of Israelite soil to take back with him (2 Kings 5:15-17).[13] He then asks Elisha to pardon him in advance because he knows that, given his position in Aram, he will have to accompany the king to worship services in the house of Rimmon, an Aramean god and, with the king leaning on his arm, he will have to bow down to that god (2 Kings 5:18). Elisha's only response to Naaman is "Go in peace." Walter Brueggemann notes that here "the general is given latitude by the prophet to live out his gratitude and his acknowledgement with whatever accommodation he must make" (Brueggemann 2001:57). The lesson provided here is that sometimes healing involves making "accommodations," that is, doing things that we may feel are against our religion.

Experts in the field contend that the HIV/AIDS pandemic will not be handled adequately until the Church is able to engage issues of sexuality and homosexuality openly and honestly. Yet the Church's official position is to condemn homosexuality as a sin, which effectively ends any discussion of the matter. It is said that the Bible itself dictates the black church's position. However, that is not a complete answer because, on the issue of slavery, the black church has been able to set aside passages that support the institution and contradict their experience as children of God.

Kelly Brown Douglas, in her work on sexuality and the black church, identifies three reasons for the church's position (Brown Douglas:1999). One reason mentioned is an African-American distrust of biblical scholarship by whites, part of a general "mistrust of white people's handling of the Bible," which makes suspect any scholarly interpretations that homosexuality, as understood today, is not condemned in the Bible (Brown Douglas:95). Another reason cited is that homosexuality is perceived to be a threat to the black community – either because it is associated with decadence in the white culture or with genocide of the black race because it is non-reproductive sexuality (Brown Douglas: 98, 101). Finally, the observation is made that, in response to racist attacks upon black sexuality historically, African-Americans have advocated the adoption of white

family norms that are both patriarchal and heterosexist, in order to be better accepted by whites (Brown Douglas:100).

Whatever the reason for the black church's stance against homosexuality, the issue must be confronted and dealt with in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis. As Naaman learned, healing may involve accommodating practices that you feel are against your religion. In describing an older AIDS activist, Cohen wrote that gays and lesbians "probably raised a moral conflict" for her but that "she had decided that for right now her individual biases and comfort level will have to take a back seat if the work is going to get finished" (Cohen: 4). To some degree, accommodation has occurred already in churches that have started AIDS-related ministries on the grounds that a Christian can "love the sinner but hate the sin" (Cohen: 4-5, 284-285). For the sake of true healing and wholeness in the community, though, the issues of sexuality and homosexuality must be engaged on a deeper level.

Gehazi's Lesson: The Condemnation of Greed

Not all of the lessons in the text come from Naaman. One lesson comes from Gehazi, Elisha's servant. Naaman offered gifts to Elisha after his healing but Elisha refused to accept them. Gehazi felt that Naaman had gotten off too lightly and he planned to get something out of Naaman. So, after Naaman is on his way back home, Gehazi catches up with Naaman and tells him that two prophets have arrived and that some silver and clothing are needed for them. Naaman graciously gives Gehazi more than he has requested. When he returns home, Gehazi stores the items for himself and lies to Elisha about what he has done. Elisha admonishes Gehazi for having taken the goods from Naaman.[14] Elisha then punishes Gehazi by giving to Gehazi the leprosy that had clung to Naaman.

This passage appears to condemn greed because Gehazi's greed is contrasted with Naaman's generosity. In the HIV/AIDS context, though, the story has fuller theological implications. In such a context, the message is that no one

should exploit those who seek healing. Consequently, the passage could serve as a warning to pharmaceutical companies that exploit those who seek healing by charging exorbitant prices. However, exploitation can be political as well as financial and there are those who exploit the HIV/AIDS crisis to support narrow political and religious agendas. For example, comments such as "HIV/AIDS only affects white men," or "This is divine punishment for homosexuals," in effect, exploit individuals and take human dignity away from the men, women, and children who are infected.

Lessons Learned Behind the Text

An issue of scholarly debate has been whether the story of Gehazi (2 Kings 5:19b-27) was a secondary addition to the tale about Naaman. On the one hand, at least one scholar has argued that Gehazi's story was "a later expansion" of the Naaman tradition, carried out to explain the name Gehazi ('avaricious') and to attribute to Elisha the same kind of power to impose and heal leprosy that Moses had (Numbers 12:10 and following) (Gray: 508). On the other hand, some scholars argue that there is a "coherence" in the chapter which indicates that it was intended to be read originally as a single narrative. The following parallel features of the text are mentioned: the beginning with the skin affliction of Naaman and the ending with the skin affliction of Gehazi; the "outsider" is healed while the "insider" is afflicted; and the faithfulness of Naaman's servant at beginning of the story is contrasted with the treachery of Elisha's servant at the end of the chapter (Seow: 192).

Whether or not the tale of Gehazi was a later addition, as the text now reads, it is a classic Deuteronomistic "blessings and curses" tale where those who are obedient, like Naaman, are blessed while those who are disobedient, like Gehazi, are cursed.[15] Such logic is problematic because the Gehazi narrative seems to imply that suffering is the punishment for disobedience or unfaithfulness. In the context of the AIDS crisis, the story's implicit meaning is troubling, to say

the least. Arguably, the contrast between Naaman and Gehazi indicates that there is a relationship between suffering and disobedience, a perspective that does not contribute constructively to the struggle for healing and wholeness. Even though this "blessings and curses" formula exists in the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings), it is countered in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.[16] In Job, the concept that God rewards the faithful and punishes the unfaithful is challenged by God's anger at Job's friends who had offered that formula as the explanation for Job's suffering (Job 42:7-9). Similarly, in Ecclesiastes, any simplistic notion of rewards and punishments is rejected because "all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Without a doubt, the blessings and curses formula exists in the biblical canon. That formula, however, is not the only explanation of human suffering that the Bible offers. Any interpretation of a biblical passage, then, must not be considered in isolation but should be evaluated in the full canonical witness of the Old and New Testaments. Consequently, biblical interpretations of the blessings and curses narratives that undermine the movement towards healing can and should be contextualized by referring to broader canonical messages.

Conclusions

In this study, one text, the Naaman's healing narrative, was examined for theological insights from the perspective of three different interpretive paradigms – those that located meaning in front of the text, in the text, and behind the text. These interpretive shifts in critical analysis are often described in almost evolutionary terms. At first, there was the historical-critical paradigm (where meaning is in the past, that is, behind the text), then the literary paradigm developed (where meaning is in the text itself), and, most recently, the cultural studies paradigm has been established (where meaning is in front of the text, based on the social locations of contemporary readers). Consequently, these paradigm shifts are seen as a chronological sequence and

are often thought to be mutually exclusive. As a result, a biblical scholar may tend to use one approach, a literary analysis, for example, and not utilize insights gained from one of the other hermeneutical approaches.

By utilizing multiple critical perspectives, multiple interpretations of the same text have been uncovered. In the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis, it is imperative that the Bible be read in new ways that will enable it to facilitate individual and societal healing rather than function as an impediment. To that end, not only must multiple meanings be uncovered, but these meanings must be evaluated according to those that are helpful in meeting the challenges brought about by the virus (such as the need to cross traditional boundaries for healing to occur) and those that are not helpful (such as the blessings and curses formula represented by the stories of Naaman and Gehazi). Given the complexity of the issues faced as Africans and African-Americans deal with HIV/AIDS, the complexity of biblical interpretation must be faced as well.

Another advantage of using different critical approaches to interpret a text is that it resists the tendency to define one approach as "the African-American approach" to biblical interpretation. Mary Ann Tolbert, a feminist New Testament scholar, has identified the dangers of associating a group with a particular way of reading a text. According to her, "insisting that the many different people who identify with one marginalized subject position must share only one single experience of reality replicates anew the oppressiveness and exclusivity of hegemonic culture" (Tolbert: 273). In addition, she finds that such essentialism will reinforce the binary logic of "us" versus "them" which is exemplary of the "binary opposition of patriarchal logic" and so ultimately confirm rather than challenge the status quo (Tolbert: 274). Developing a truly liberatory hermeneutic, then, requires using different critical methods and approaches to reading the Bible, even when the interpretations and their theological implications will address one particular context, that is, for example, the context of African-Americans.

Furthermore, a liberatory hermeneutic dictates that we recognize the multifaceted nature of the African-American

community itself. Far from being a monolithic community, the black community in the United States has differences of gender, class, and sexual orientation within its ranks. As Cohen notes in her work, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, the agendas for the black community privilege the perspectives of men over women, the middle class over the poor, and heterosexuals over homosexuals. Consequently, those populations within the black community that are impacted most directly by the HIV/AIDS pandemic – poor women and men, drug addicts and homosexuals--are often marginalized and their issues are not given priority as political and religious agendas are shaped (Cohen: 10-13, 248). Because of the shocking statistics on the impact of the virus on our community's women and children, as well as our men, we must reconsider the "boundaries" of our community and incorporate those who have all too often been excluded from our mainstream concerns. The HIV/AIDS pandemic means that we need to read the Bible in new ways as we begin to think of ourselves as a community in new ways.

Considering the richness of interpretive possibilities, the brilliant and multifaceted diamond gemstone becomes symbolic of our task as biblical scholars and theologians. In the same way that the different facets of a diamond enhance its value, we need to understand that different interpretive possibilities are facets that enhance the Bible's value in helping us meet the needs of African and African-American communities. All too often, the biblical text has been used to convey only one supposedly authoritative meaning. In that respect, the text has been thought of as a mirror. The problem with a mirror as the symbol for the interpretive task is that a single image cannot reflect the complexity of our class, gender, and cultural realities. To read the Bible more effectively in the context of HIV/AIDS, we must recognize that a diamond is worth more than a mirror both literally and figuratively.

Endnotes

1. The reference to "the black church" denotes the seven major historic black denominations, three Methodist, three Baptist, and one Pentecostal, which are the historically independent and totally black controlled denominations that, among other things, have more than eighty percent of all black Christians as their members. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 1. For a treatment of the fuller range of African-American religious experience, see Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville, Tn.: University of Knoxville Press, 2002).
2. For a detailed discussion of the shifts in interpretive paradigms, see Fernando F. Segovia, "And They Began To Speak In Other Tongues': Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism," in *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, Vol. I, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1-34.
3. Redaction and transmission history are normally associated with the historical-critical hermeneutical paradigm. However, no assumption is made here that the determinative meaning is that of the original author and the inconsistencies uncovered will be discussed for their ideological content and not as a means of dividing the text into units as would be the case in a traditional historical-critical analysis. See Wesley J. Bergen, "The Prophetic Alternative: Elisha and the Israelite Monarchy," in *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective*, ed. Robert B. Coote (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 129.
4. All Scriptural references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
5. Scholars doubt that true leprosy, known as Hansen's disease today, is referred to here and that the disease may have been instead a form of psoriasis or vitiligo. See, for example, Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, II Kings, *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 11 (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1988), 63.
6. http://www.blackaidsday.org/numberssay.htm
7. http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/facts/afam.htm.

8. *Ibid.* See also Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 121-144.
9. Andrew Billingsley and Cleopatra Howard Caldwell, "The Church, the Family, and the School in the African American Community," *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3: 427-440 (1991). Quoted in Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 278.
10. Similarly, in their work, Lincoln and Mamiya estimated that 78% of the African-American population is Christian. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. For comparable statistics, see also Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), xii-xiii.
11. A possible resource for further theological reflection is the work of Nancy L. Eiesland, a professor at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia, who has written on theology and people living with disabilities. See her books, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) and *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).
12. Similar "conspiracy theories" in the black community are mentioned in Anthony Pinn's recent work. See Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 98-99.
13. Naaman's request may indicate his belief that Yahweh could be worshipped only on Israelite soil. Choon-Leong Seow, 2 Kings, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 195. According to biblical scholars, such a request would be consistent with monolatry, a developmental stage that precedes monotheism and associates deities with specific geographical territories. See John Gray, I and II Kings, *Old Testament Library*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 507.
14. In the NRSV, Elisha admonishes Gehazi for "accepting" the goods from Naaman. Brueggemann rightly points out that the NRSV translation "is weak" because "it suggests passive receptivity rather than aggressive appropriation," as indicated in the Hebrew. Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 337.
15. Another Deuteronomic "blessings and curses" tale that juxtaposes the "good" outsider and the "bad" insider are the accounts of Rahab and Achan in Joshua 2 and 7 respectively. As black people read the Bible in the era of HIV/AIDS, these "blessing and curses" narratives offer a mixed message. Such narratives offer hope to African peoples who are all too often

"outsiders" with respect to systems of power and authority. At the same time, these texts attribute suffering to disobedience or unfaithfulness and so blame the sufferer.

16. On the topic of reading Job in the era of HIV/AIDS, see Madipoane Masenya, "Between Unjust Suffering and the 'Silent' God: Job and HIV/AIDS sufferers in South Africa" *Missionalia* 29:2 (August 2001): 186-199; and Sarojini Nadar, "Re-reading Job in the midst of Suffering in the HIV/AIDS Era: How Not to Talk to God," Paper presented at the Circle of Concerned African Women's 2002 Conference: Sex, Stigma, and HIV/AIDS: African Women Theologians Challenging Religion, Culture, and Social Practices, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

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