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Towards a biblical and pastoral approach to illness in an African context with particular reference to HIV AIDS

Keith Ferdinando

I Traditional Perceptions

'He died of AIDS, obviously,' Moleboheng told her mother after the cousin left. She was far too polite and sensible to say this in front of the relative, for then the relative would report to others that her family were starting vicious rumours. Mama Khanyile conceded the possibility of AIDS, although that didn't necessarily rule out isidliso*. Her view was that the AIDS, if indeed it was AIDS, must have been sent by someone. Someone had wanted to see the young man dead and had used witchcraft to send this AIDS or* isidliso *to kill him. Moleboheng still insisted that was nonsense, as she does whenever her mother talks about witchcraft. In this, as in most things pertaining to witchcraft, the daughter and her family agree to disagree. She knows that within African society at large her way of looking at things is in a distinct minority.*[1]

The brief story told by Adam Ashforth underlines the equivocation surrounding the understanding of AIDS in the African context. It articulates a particular culturally acquired perception of its origin, and in so doing draws attention to the role of culture in human life and its near total impact on thought and behaviour. We are creatures of culture and respond to events in accordance with beliefs assimilated from our cultures. As human beings are bearers of God's image, even though that image has been distorted as a result of

1 A. Ashforth, 'AIDS, Witchcraft, and the Problem of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *African Studies* 61.1 (2002), 121. *Isidliso* 'otherwise called "Black poison"', is 'an evil work of the people they call witches'.

Keith Ferdinando *(PhD London Bible College CNAA) served in different parts of Africa in theological education for many years including as lecturer and principal of Faculté de Théologie Evangélique au Rwanda and as theological education consultant with Africa Inland Mission International, as well as teaching at his alma mater. Currently associate pastor of Woodford Evangelical Church, London, he is the author of* The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective: a Study of Demonology and Redemption in the African Context *(Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999).* *The article was originally published in the* Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology *31.2 (2012) and is used with permission.*

the fall, there is much in culture that is good. However, sin profoundly affects human intelligence and understanding, which means that culture is also and in all cases deeply flawed by falsehood, which needs to be unmasked and replaced by truth.

The Bible indicates that whole cultures can be penetrated by error, with inevitable consequences for all those who are shaped by them. And it is of course as true of western cultures as it is of African. The problem is that people cling tenaciously to the most fundamental beliefs and attitudes that underlie a culture, such that substantial change is very difficult to bring about. We may indeed more easily identify the problems confronting people of another culture than those of our own.

In this case the issue is that of African conceptions of misfortune. The experience of suffering is a universal one, with which every human being without exception is confronted. However, responses are culture-specific, and in consequence they are often very different. The approach common in African tradition has been termed an 'interpersonal causal ontology',[2] the meaning of which is expressed more simply in a Zulu proverb, 'There is always somebody'.[3]

This means that when suffering comes in almost any form, it may be attributed, for example, to the malice of a spirit, the punishment of an ancestor, or the aggression of a witch or sorcerer. This need not imply an ignorance of the empirical reason for the affliction. The empirical approach explains *how* an event happened; but the pursuit of a spirit or sorcerer responds to the deeper, more unsettling question of *why* it happened—why to this person and at this time?

Traditional approaches are concerned with the pursuit of the meaning of an illness or an accident, and they locate it in primarily personal terms. Accordingly, they do not deny the fact that snake venom and lightning kill, or that germs and microbes make people sick. Rather, in the words of one informant, 'it may be quite true that typhus is carried by lice, but who sent the infected louse? Why did it bite one man and not another?'[4] In contrast, secular western approaches focus exclusively on the empirical factors responsible for the suffering, and do not pursue the question, 'why?', at all. Not unreasonably African peoples are not satisfied with this, which would leave them, as it leaves westerners, in a meaningless and inexplicable cosmos.

In African contexts AIDS will therefore very frequently be understood in culturally defined terms as the result of personal causation. This situates it in the cultural universe of the sufferers, their families and of course the society in general. The approach is powerful because it provides explanation that is familiar and that has deep roots in traditional thinking. It enables comprehension of the phenomenon, gives it meaning and, perhaps most important of all, offers a strategy for

2 See T. D. Stabell, '"The Modernity of Witchcraft"' and the Gospel in Africa', in *Missiology* 38.4 (October 2010), 461.

3 A.-I. Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (London: C. Hurst, 1989 [1976]), 270.

4 Quoted by M. Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), 85.

dealing with the problem, although one that is essentially ineffective in terms of its curative potential.

Recent research therefore shows that, for example, in Cameroon AIDS deaths are likely to be blamed on witchcraft; in Botswana too people attribute AIDS to witchcraft, especially because of the length of the illness; in Chiawa, south of Lusaka in Zambia, a witch finder was hired in 1994-1995 due to the high number of deaths from AIDS and accidents, and 15 people then died as a result of the imposition of a poison ordeal to flush out the witches; and research conducted in two villages of the Abakwaya of Tanzania, a region where there is the highest incidence of AIDS, showed that 80% of the population visit diviners and traditional healers before seeking other treatment, occasioning a consequently high mortality rate.[5]

The belief that witchcraft is the cause of HIV-AIDS may also lead to carelessness about its spread, because emphasis is placed on the occult factors involved rather than the physical.

II An Evangelical Theological Response

Theology, and more specifically evangelical theology, is concerned with making the connexions between the unchanging word of the living God, and the shifting worlds of human beings. It is about bringing truth to bear on ourselves, and on the reality we inhabit. In this case, therefore, a theological response must begin by addressing the culturally defined world of the sick, their families and their societies in the light of revealed truth.

If the culture is offering responses to AIDS that do nothing of any substance in terms of real prevention and cure, then what is required is the pursuit of cultural transformation, which can emerge only from a profound renewal of belief structures. In the African context, as in many others, Christian teaching very often fails to address this level, resulting in a superficial, and indeed syncretistic, Christian discipleship. What is required is a biblical and counter-cultural response of some depth.

Before proceeding it must be emphasised that a theological response to AIDS in the African context does not mean simply moving towards a western, secularised view of reality. The problem of illness, including AIDS, needs to be understood in biblical and not in western terms. A western secular approach may be effective in purely clinical terms but, as we have noted, it leaves the sufferer in an empty and meaningless universe. African understandings of illness may be deficient in many respects, but their great positive value is a retention of the pursuit of meaning. There is a deep sense that suffering ought to make sense, that there must be a reason, that we do not inhabit a meaningless universe.

A western perspective which abandons the pursuit of meaning will not do, which is why even in modern African cities people continue to go to diviners and traditional healers, often before seeking other more empirical forms of treatment. Moreover, from a biblical perspective the pursuit of

5 The examples in this paragraph are all drawn from G. Ter Haar (ed.), *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Ethiopia: Africa World Press, 2007), 123, 221, 234, 262.

meaning is not invalid, but rather the contrary. When the disciples encountered 'a man blind from birth' they asked Jesus, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (Jn 9:2). Jesus did not criticise their attempt to understand the reason for the man's suffering, but he enlarged the range of possibilities which they should consider: '"Neither this man nor his parents sinned", said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life"' (Jn 9:3).

The pursuit of meaning, the elementary desire to understand, that is evident in African thought, is legitimate. AIDS does indeed take place in the context of a universe which has meaning, because a sovereign God made and rules it. The issue is that of ensuring that we look for meaning in the right places, which for Christians involves submitting our thinking to the evaluation of Scripture.

Therefore, the goal must be a reconstruction of the understanding of suffering in biblical terms. At root this means a deeper awareness of both creation and redemption, with all their rich and multiple implications, through which belief structures, and so lives, will be transformed (Rom 12:2). This is the challenge for Christian health workers in Africa, who are themselves products of their various cultures—western or African—all of which distort truth to some degree and in one way or another.

It is also, and especially, the task of the church, and a particular challenge to its approaches to catechesis and discipling, which can all too often be superficial or even non-existent, in striking contrast with the radical and life-changing approaches to the formation of new believers which characterised some of the earliest churches.[6]

III Transforming Perspectives

The vital issue is that of the causation of disease. This leads in turn to the question of response, for necessarily the way in which men and women attribute cause will determine the range of therapies which they are prepared to consider. In biblical terms the identification of causation is not simple, and in any single event various causes may be operative at different levels of reality. Applied to the particular case of illness, four different levels may in principle be relevant at any one time.

1. Physical causation

The Bible affirms the reality of physical causes, which corresponds to the empirical approach of modern medicine. Central to the biblical revelation is the doctrine of creation which has rich and multiple implications. Especially important for present purposes is the fact that the God who created is rational, consistent and faithful, one who speaks and reasons, and whose works reflect his own rational and consistent nature.

Accordingly, the cosmos he has made and which he continues to uphold, is one of order and regularity, whose structures and rhythms may be observed, identified, understood and, to some degree, harnessed to human ends. It is not arbitrary and capricious,

6 See, for example, C. E. Arnold, 'Early Church Catechesis and New Christians' Classes in Contemporary Evangelicalism', in *JETS* 47.1 (March 2004), 39.

just as God is not arbitrary and capricious. It is not subject to the control of fickle and unpredictable spirits and spiritual forces, as it is in animistic thought and cultures, for which nature is 'a supreme mystery, inconsistent, unpredictable, and arbitrary'.[7]

There is indeed a strong demythologising polemic in the Old Testament, found especially, although not exclusively, in the early chapters of Genesis, which identifies the sun and other celestial bodies, the sea and the great fish as part of God's good physical creation, and subject to his rule.[8] They are not spiritual powers and forces, as they were for many of the peoples of the ancient Near East. Moreover, such an approach also sharply distinguishes the biblical understanding of nature from animistic perceptions.

At the same time, God made human beings in his own image. The exact meaning of the *imago Dei* is not explicitly developed in the Bible and remains a subject of discussion, but the flow of the text in Genesis 1 is suggestive. Both the initial divine deliberation, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness' (Gen 1:26), and its fulfilment shortly afterwards, 'So God created man in his own image' (Gen 1:27), are each followed by very similar statements of the role which humanity is to play on earth: 'and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground' (Gen 1:26), and again, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (Gen 1:28).

The implication is that at least one aspect of the divine image lies in the fact that men and women are endowed with reason, along with the ability to order and rule that which God has made. They are able to study the world: to observe, identify and understand the regularities of natural processes, and to do so to an ever increasing degree. Human beings are knowing beings (*homo sapiens*). Moreover, not only are they *able* to do so, but it is their *calling*. They are mandated by the creator to pursue understanding of what he has made—to rethink his thoughts after him. This is expressed in the words attributed to the astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630):

> I was merely thinking God's thoughts after him. Since we astronomers are priests of the highest God in regard to the book of nature, it befits us to be thoughtful, not of the glory of our minds, but rather, above all else, of the glory of God.[9]

Moreover, they are responsible beings, stewards of creation who are summoned to exercise rule over God's world as his image bearers, and to use and adapt their growing knowledge

7 R. Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2006), 15.

8 G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 9.

9 These words, allegedly of Johannes Kepler, are much quoted but not so easy to locate. They are cited by H. M. Morris, *Men of science, men of God: great scientists who believed the Bible* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 1982), 11-12, and widely referred to on the web but without identification of their location in Kepler's works.

both to care for the world and in the pursuit of beneficent human ends.

All of this means that a seriously scientific comprehension of the physical realm becomes possible, precisely because the Bible recognises the reality, regularity and orderliness of natural, physical causes, and the consequent possibility of understanding them. It is largely for this reason that the rise of science took place almost exclusively in societies whose cultures were significantly permeated by a Christian view of reality: 'Christian theology was essential for the rise of science in the West, just as surely as non-Christian theologies had stifled the scientific quest everywhere else.'[10] By contrast, given the animistic understanding of the world, the very notion of an animistic scientist is 'an oxymoron, like a square circle'.[11]

In particular, the biblical perspective means that human beings are able to study and increasingly to understand themselves, and specifically the incarnate—physical and bodily—dimension of their nature as human beings, with immense potential for both preventive and curative medicine. The empirical pursuit of medical knowledge, including knowledge of the human body and its functioning, of health and disease and the factors that contribute to both, arises therefore out of a specifically biblical conception of reality. To engage in medical research and to apply its findings to the pursuit of human well-being is, therefore, a profoundly Christian calling, rooted in what the Bible has to say about the nature of God, of creation, and of the mandate addressed to Adam and Eve at the very outset of history.

Moreover, such an approach reflects the biblical notion of wisdom, whose central concern is that men and women live in conformity with the way in which God has designed the world he made, rather than in defiance of it. They should, therefore, seek to understand the patterns of creation and life that the creator has established, and actively allow their thoughts and lives to be shaped by them.

Accordingly, as God has made a world that is orderly, with natural causes and consequences, true biblical wisdom lies in identifying them, and then working with them to promote health and respond to disease. In contrast, folly means ignoring the discernible structures of physical reality and so, for example, accepting exclusively mystical explanations of illness and relying on correspondingly esoteric therapies.

> Israel's sages believed that both nature and the world of human beings were determined by a fundamental order. To act in harmony with the universal order which sustained creation was their supreme goal: human behaviour either strengthened the existing order or contributed to the forces of chaos which threatened life.[12]

Accordingly, while the Bible may not have much to say about them, the

10 Stark, *The Victory of Reason*, 15.

11 D. L. Miller, *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, 2001), 111.

12 E. J. Schnabel, 'Wisdom' in T. D. Alexander, & B. S. Rosner (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (electronic ed.) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

few references that exist assume without debate the use of medicine and of physicians, because their development and use are an inevitable consequence of the biblical understanding of the way in which the world and its human inhabitants have been made. Thus, for example, Hebrew dietary and hygienic rules found in the Old Testament were more developed than those of other Ancient Near Eastern nations, and soundly based on the observed facts of contagion and infection. Albright writes, 'No part of the Hebrew Bible is more clearly empirico-logical in its background than the rules of purity', and he contrasts them with the taboos of other Ancient Near Eastern peoples in which the influence of sympathetic magic is evident.[13]

The book of Proverbs shows an awareness of the relationship between mental state and physical health (Prov 14:30; 17:22; 18:14). Jeremiah 8:22 assumes the existence of balm and physicians, although clearly the text has a primarily spiritual reference: 'Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?' Exodus 21:18-19 implies the use, and expense, of medical care:

> If men quarrel and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist and he does not die but is confined to bed, the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff; however, he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.

Even Paul's encouragement to Timothy displays an awareness of the medicinal value of 'a little wine': 'Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses' (1 Tim 4:23). Meanwhile, the denunciation of Asa's use of physicians (2 Chron 16:12) needs not imply condemnation of physicians as such but perhaps of Asa's dependence on them to the exclusion of God, or of his use of the contemporary medico-religious practices of neighbouring peoples.

Accordingly, the Bible does not suggest that illness is normally dealt with simply by prayer, although prayer is certainly a major part of the response, as we will see. There is a strong and consistent biblical emphasis on the use of *means* as human beings live out their daily lives and pursue the fulfilment of God's will. In terms of evangelism this quite foundational point is expressed in the title of William Carey's momentous work, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792).

Similarly, just as the fact that God gives food and expects his children to ask him for their daily bread, does not remove the necessity of working for it, so also the fact that health is ultimately in his hands, does not remove human responsibility to be active in its promotion and restoration. This obviously includes abstinence from behaviour—very frequently sinful behaviour—that has a known link to illness, including forms of sexual activity which are associated with the spread of HIV-AIDS. And where illness occurs, it also in-

13 W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1968), 152-153. See also R. K. Harrison, 'Disease', in G. W. Bromiley (ed.), *ISBE*, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 955.

cludes the use of medication whose efficacy has been established by those natural sciences whose origins are deeply embedded in the biblical worldview.

2. Moral causation

The impact of human sin on the physical creation is very obvious at various levels. Pollution and environmental degradation are frequently linked to human irresponsibility, greed and selfishness. However, at a more profound level the rebellion of men and women at the beginning of history has brought about a fundamental and pervasive dislocation and alienation in the cosmos as a whole. The Bible indicates that there is a profound relationship between the human race and its habitat which goes beyond purely empirical connections, such that when Adam and Eve rebelled, the world they inhabited experienced a 'fall' with them.

The verdict pronounced on Adam following his disobedience indicates that such a fall came about as the result of a divine word of judgement:

> Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it', cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return' (Gen 3:17-19).

The relationship between the spiritual state of human beings and the condition of the world they inhabit is again expressed when Paul looks back to the moment of the fall, the point at which the natural order was 'subjected to frustration' and 'bondage to decay', and ahead to the final redemption of God's people when it will be 'liberated' and 'brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God':

> The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Rom 8:19-22).

And so the book of Revelation looks forward to a new creation from which all evil of every sort will be forever banished—'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1), in which 'there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (Rev 21:4). In brief, human rebellion has had devastating consequences for the whole cosmos, while the consummation of God's work of salvation at the return of Christ will bring about a dramatic reversal.

In the light of this, all human suffering, including illness, should be understood as a consequence of the fall. Sin entails devastating physical as well as spiritual consequences for all human beings, of which the ultimate is death itself. Human pain is, therefore, in the words of D. A. Carson, 'the effluent of

the fall, the result of a fallen world'.[14]

However, this does not mean that particular cases of suffering are necessarily due to particular individual sins. In the Old Testament a substantial body of literature and reflexion, including Job 1-2, Psalms 37 and 73, and the prophecy of Habakuk, wrestles with the ambiguities of human suffering. The 'wicked' seem frequently to escape justice and judgement, while the righteous suffer, and often experience no apparent resolution of their trials.

Meanwhile, the righteous may suffer innocently because of the sin of the wicked, as when Jonathan, son of king Saul, fell in battle on Mount Gilboa along with his father. Similarly, Jesus rejected the idea that the affliction of the 'man blind from birth' was due to sin (Jn 9:1-3), or that those who died in an atrocity committed by Pilate at the Temple or from the collapse of 'the tower in Siloam', did so because they were greater sinners than everybody else (Lk 13:1-5).

Nevertheless, throughout the Old Testament there is also a persistent and unavoidable emphasis on the retribution that sin brings. It is seen on a national scale when the kingdoms of Israel and then Judah are destroyed by Assyria and Babylon respectively, or at a personal level when King Uzziah is struck down with leprosy due to his sacrilegious presumption in assuming the role of a priest (2 Chron 26:16-21), and examples could be multiplied. On occasion Jesus suggested that particular sin had caused specific sufferings. He counselled the man healed at the pool of Bethesda, 'See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you' (Jn 5:14).

Paul and the author of Revelation attributed some particular cases of illness in local churches to specific preceding sin (1 Cor 11:30; Rev 2:21-23), while James exhorted his readers, 'confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed' (Jas 5:16). And Luke, a physician, attributed the sudden death of Herod Agrippa to the fact that he 'did not give praise to God' when he was hailed as a god by the people of Tyre (Acts 12:20-23).

In brief, sickness is in the world because sin is in the world: in a general sense, all sickness without exception is the result of sin, and there are no 'innocent' sufferers for none is without sin. Sometimes there is a direct and even obvious relationship between specific sin and consequent illness. However, one cannot simply, and naively, reason back from every individual case of illness and pain to a specifically identifiable sin that has brought it about.

3. Occult causation

Human rebellion not only brought about massive disruption to the natural realm, but has also resulted in the subjection and oppression of human beings by Satan and the forces of darkness that he controls. Sin means that 'man attempts to live independently of his Creator, treating himself as his own god, and thereby not only ceases to be truly himself but also loses control of what should have been under his dominion *and falls under the control of*

14 D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 48.

demonic powers [my italics].'[15]

The primary manifestation of this is spiritual and moral: Satan holds lost men and women captive in spiritual blindness and death, unable and disinclined to pursue their own redemption (Rom 8:6-8; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2; 1 Jn 5:19). He is a murderer and destroyer (Jn 8:44), and his purpose is to bring about the eternal alienation of human beings from the creator in whom alone life is found.

However, it is also clear in the Bible that Satan has a role in physical suffering including illness. Insofar as it was his temptation of the first human couple that brought about the fall, from which all disease ultimately flows, he may indeed be seen as implicated in a general way in all human illness, suffering and death. This would explain Peter's statement that Jesus 'went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil' (Acts 10:38).

However, the Bible suggests that he may also on occasion be directly involved in particular cases of suffering. This is manifestly true of demonic 'possession' (which the synoptic gospels refer to as being 'demonised', 'having a demon' or being 'in an evil spirit'),[16] but it may also be true of some who do not present the classic symptoms of 'possession' but suffer simply physical afflictions.

The woman whom Jesus cured of curvature of the spine (possibly 'spondylitis ankylopoeitica')[17] had been 'crippled by a spirit' and 'kept bound' by Satan (Lk 13:10-17). Job's trials, including his own physical illness which may have been a very acute form of dermatitis,[18] were brought about by Satan, while Paul's 'thorn in the flesh', probably an illness, was cased by 'a messenger of Satan' which would almost certainly have been understood to be a demon (2 Cor 12:7).

The Bible makes it clear, however, that the sufferings of both Job and Paul took place only in the context of God's sovereign rule, as we shall see. Further, it would be very far from the truth to suppose that the biblical witness identifies Satan or demons as the invariable explanation of every particular, individual case of illness: 'for the New Testament writers there was no simple equation between infirmity and the demonic.'[19]

Similarly, the biblical testimony repudiates any 'simple equation' between infirmity and witchcraft. Belief in witchcraft has certainly been extremely widespread, if not universal, in human societies across the globe and throughout history.[20] Although the precise content of witchcraft beliefs is

15 C. K. Barrett, 1962, *From First Adam to Last: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: A. & C. Black, 1962), 92-3.

16 See K. Ferdinando, *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective: a Study of Demonology and Redemption in the African Context* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 190-191.

17 The diagnosis proposed by J. Wilkinson, 'The Case of the Bent Women in Luke 13v10-17', *EvQ* 49 (1977), 196-200.

18 F. I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 96.

19 J. C. Thomas, *The Devil, Disease and Deliverance: Origins of Illness in New Testament Thought* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 302.

20 See M. Marwick (ed.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982 [1947]), 14.

highly culture specific, at its heart lies the belief that some human beings are able to harm and even kill others by non-physical, occult means.

While it is an issue of some dispute, the Bible also refers to witchcraft as a potential factor in human suffering, but references are few and there is scarcely any explicit, sustained discussion of the matter. However, Balaam was clearly a pagan sorcerer with an established reputation for the power of his magic, which is why Balak, king of Moab, sent for him: 'Come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed' (Num 22:6).

What is striking in the story is that God intervened in such a way that Balaam was compelled to bless rather than curse his people. The projected occult aggression was smothered as God reversed the evil intention of Balak and Balaam. 'The only force that shapes the destiny of Israel is God's plan, and no magical practices can thwart that divine intention.'[21] Sorcery may therefore exist but, like Satan and his demonic agents, it is subject to God's sovereign will.

Much later, in a quite enigmatic passage, Ezekiel seems to have had the activities of female sorcerers in view:

> Woe to the women who sew magic charms on all their wrists and make veils of various lengths for their heads in order to ensnare people … I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds (Ezek 13:17-23).

As the prophecy is addressed to the exiles their sorcery may well testify to the influence of Babylonian culture. The bands of cloth and veils were apparently part of the ritual that they followed, magic amulets perhaps 'intended to bring about untimely deaths'.[22]

References are equally few in the New Testament, but Paul identifies witchcraft as one of the acts of the sinful nature in Galatians (5:19-21). The Greek word he uses, *pharmakeia*, which is translated as 'witchcraft', is related to *pharmakon* which initially denoted a drug often used in erotic magic. 'For the most part, however, the cognates of φάρμακον [*pharmakon*] refer more often to magical material used for purposes of hate rather than love.'[23] In the culture which the Galatians shared, therefore, one of the forms that sin took was sorcery, the attempt to use occult means to harm another person. Paul recognised the reality of the act and its hostile intent, although he does not discuss its exact nature nor comment on its efficacy.

Although Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains no explicit reference to witchcraft, the city of Ephesus was

21 H. C. Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 18.

22 D. E. Aune, 'Magic', in G. W. Bromiley (ed.), *ISBE*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 215. See too R. H. Alexander, 'Ezekiel' in F. E. Gaebelein (ed.) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* vol 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

23 E. M. Yamauchi, 'Magic in the Biblical World' in *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983), 181.

well known as a centre of magic, which was somewhat focused around the temple of Diana. An awareness of that background illuminates the meaning of parts of the apostle's argument as he addresses Christian believers concerned, perhaps, about their exposure to occult aggression, including witchcraft and demonic attack.

Especially significant in this context is his emphasis on Christ's absolute superiority over every conceivable source of power in the invisible world of spirits and occult activity. Christ's is the name which is above every name, for God has 'seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given' (Eph 1:20-21). For Paul's readers the words, 'rule and authority, power and dominion' explicitly identified the spirits which stood behind pagan magic and of which they may have been afraid, but Paul insists that every such power, whether known by name or not—'every title that can be given'—was subject to Christ the Lord.

Moreover, it is significant that he neither affirms nor denies the efficacy of witchcraft or sorcery, although he apparently assumes that if it exists the power behind it must be demonic and not merely human.[24] Nor does he discuss the details of the Ephesians' beliefs in witchcraft, whatever they may have been, and they were certainly varied and complex as is the case also in African tradition. In short, he does not mock or minimise their fears, but he does not confirm them either.

What he does is to declare that, whatever hostile powers there might be, whatever they might do, whatever they might be called, however they may be conceived, Christ is infinitely greater and is able to guard his people who, as he goes on to say, are indeed already seated 'with him in the heavenly realms' (2:6), and therefore also 'far above all rule and authority, power and dominion'. His purpose is so to plant in their minds the truth of Christ raised and reigning, and of their own position in and with Christ, that their fears, whether well-founded or not, will be relieved.[25]

What is striking is the relative lack of reference to witchcraft in both Old and New Testaments, even though it was well-known, and often much feared, among neighbouring peoples. The Bible recognises that there are practitioners of the occult arts, and on quite rare occasions seems to confirm that they may indeed be instrumental in inflicting harm on their intended victims.

However, it stops very far short of seeing witchcraft as a total explanation of pain or illness. Nowhere do the Scriptures suggest that witches and sorcerers are *major* or *pervasive* causes

24 H. Hill, 'Witchcraft and the Gospel: Insights from Africa', *Missiology* 24.3 (July 1996), argues that witchcraft may come from the unconscious power of human beings. However, there are biblical grounds for supposing that the power behind all supernatural activity, other than that effected by the Holy Spirit or angels, is demonic. Accordingly, in Matthew 12:24-28, when Jesus and the Jerusalem rabbis debated the source of the power by which he expelled demons, both parties recognized only two possibilities—it was either Beelzebub (Satan) or the Holy Spirit.

25 See the brief discussion in P. G. Hiebert, R. D. Shaw, T Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 173.

of human suffering, and the rarity with which the issue comes up is decisive evidence against such a conception. The emphasis falls on the moral dimension mentioned above, far more than on occult causation. Human beings are not primarily victims of occult forces that they cannot control; they are responsible sinners who, in their sufferings, live out the consequences of their own rebellion.

> Rather than endorsing witch discourses featuring a world of normally virtuous people being attacked by others who represent evil incarnate, the Bible presents everyone as sinners, with terribly flawed understandings of the nature of evil.[26]

If one seeks a biblical *explanation* of suffering, it is not to be found in witchcraft.

4. The sovereign God

In Scripture God is the sovereign Creator of all that exists, and an ever-present, living and dynamic reality, who is Lord of health, illness and death. His agency in bringing suffering and death on communities or individuals is evident throughout the Bible, and has already been discussed.

However, he is also sovereign in the incidence of suffering in *every* case, for there is no corner of the cosmos in which he is not Lord. So, it is he who allowed Job and Paul to suffer demonic affliction, while limiting both the extent and duration of their trials. The biblical text makes it clear that Satan could do nothing to harm Job without divine authorisation, and when he did act he could not go beyond the limits that God had set (Job 1-2). Paul uses the so-called 'divine passive' to refer to his own affliction by a demon: 'there *was given* me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me'. Furthermore, he stresses the way in which the affliction, even thought it came through demonic agency, served to accomplish God's own good purposes—'to keep me from becoming conceited' (2 Cor 12:7-10).

In Revelation even the beast that rises from the sea under Satan's inspiration, and then goes on to attack and subdue the people of God, can do so only within limits imposed by God. This is again indicated by the repeated use of the passive voice: 'the beast *was given* a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months … He *was given power* to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he *was given authority* over every tribe, people, language and nation' (Rev 13:5,7).

The use of magic was widespread among Israel's neighbours: 'There can be no doubt that both the Old Testament and the New Testament were born in environments permeated with magical beliefs and practices.'[27] However, the relative neglect of the whole issue in Scripture is significant, and suggests that an overwhelming awareness of God's sovereign and omnipresent power on the part of the authors of

26 R. J. Priest, 'Witches and the Problem of Evil: Looking behind accusations of witchcraft', in *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 15.6 (2009), 30-32.

27 Yamauchi, 'Magic in the Biblical World', 169.

Scripture put the feeble performances of magic practitioners in the shade.

We have already noted the way in which Balaam's aggressive sorcery was turned into the blessing of God's people. In dealing with Egyptian magic, whether at the time of Joseph or Moses, or of Babylonian divination in the book of Daniel, the Bible does not deny that the practitioners were able to produce supernatural effects, but it points to the weakness and inadequacy of their efforts in comparison with the acts of the living God.

Consequently, throughout Scripture godly sufferers turn to God for relief. This does not remove their responsibility to pursue health and healing through empirical means. This is indeed the normal way in which he brings healing, although on occasion he may act directly—or miraculously—to heal without the use of any means at all. However, whatever the mode of God's operation, afflicted believers do not pursue witches or sorcerers, nor seek to appease or accommodate demons.

Faced with suffering Paul and Job both prayed. Job indeed was not aware of the immediate, Satanic, cause of his suffering, but in a world where occult explanations were rife he relentlessly sought relief from God alone. The same is true of the many individual psalms of lament, in which the sufferer turns to God alone in his pain. And of course Paul prayed repeatedly for the removal of his affliction, until he became convinced that it was God's will for him. If the varied purposes of God constitute the ultimate explanatory framework in which suffering takes place, then for the believer prayer must inevitably be vital to any response. 'Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord' (Jas 5:14, and note also 5:16).

5. Multiple levels

Finally, the Bible has a holistic vision in which the different levels of causation may be operative simultaneously. Perhaps the most obvious example is the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, which was caused by Judas' betrayal, by the conspiracy of the Jewish religious leadership of the time, by the approval of the Roman authorities, by Satan himself, and ultimately 'by God's set purpose and foreknowledge' (Acts 2:23). Similarly the sufferings of Job involved physical factors, including in his case hostile political activity and climatic events, as well as Satanic involvement and ultimate control by God of all that was taking place.

In the case of physical illness, the involvement of natural factors will invariably be assumed as it is consistent with the way the world has been created. However, in terms of explanation illness occurs in the context of a physical creation which is fallen. It is for that reason that harmful germs, bacteria, viruses and so on have become a part of the whole process of cause and effect. Moreover, there may be a particular moral element and, in exceptional cases, perhaps even some occult involvement, although the latter would be very difficult to identify. However, whatever the factors involved, God is always the one who remains Lord of health, illness and death.

IV Responding to HIV-AIDS

The final issue is that of considering

how this brief analysis might apply to the understanding and treatment of HIV-AIDS in the African context.

1. Renewed minds

The first and most critical issue is the way in which HIV-AIDS is understood and explained. Minds shape lives; we live out our beliefs. In the case of HIV-AIDS the total explanatory structure at the heart of many traditional African cultures is rooted in an essentially erroneous perception of the causes of suffering. Its consequence will invariably be the adoption of futile therapies, which in some cases lead to a worsening of the patient's condition, and possibly its transmission to other persons. It is also likely to contribute to a fatalism which perseveres in the sort of destructive sexual behaviour in which HIV-AIDS flourishes, believing that nothing at all can make any difference.

The errors involved come ultimately from Satan, who is 'a liar and the father of lies' and whose purpose is destruction (Jn 8:44); the answer to lies is truth, which liberates from error and its consequences. Accordingly, as Paul exhorts his readers: 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Rom 12:2). The lies that have been assimilated from the specifically African cultural 'pattern of this world' must be effaced, as minds are renewed in the light of truth, thereby producing a transformation of life.

The issue is at heart a profoundly spiritual one, concerned with the noetic, or intellectual, consequences of sin. The response lies in the ministry of God's Spirit, who alone can bring about the penetrating and transformative appropriation of biblical truth which is required. It challenges the church to a much deeper grasp of God's word, and a correspondingly earnest effort to communicate it in its richness.

2. Medicine, witches and community

The vital concern must therefore be to promote the replacement of an occult explanatory framework (the traditional African 'interpersonal causal ontology') with one rooted in the uniquely biblical notion of a physical creation, imbued by its creator with order, regularity and comprehensible natural causes, but fallen as a result of human sin. This may seem to represent the promotion of western cultural values as opposed to African ones, but the reality is more complex.

Modern western cultures have in fact strayed from the biblical approach, in which God constantly upholds and is sovereign over the operation of physical causes, which are therefore totally open to him, and has moved to a closed materialistic system which entirely excludes him. This leads inevitably to purely secular medical approaches with no place for prayer, the confession of sin, or simple faith in God.

A faithfully biblical approach would entail a number of things. First, it would mean the pursuit and application of empirical medical responses to prevention and cure, rooted as they are in a biblical understanding of creation. Second, this necessarily implies a vigorous and biblical response to the traditional explanatory framework. On the one hand, this means an insistence that identifying the witch as the generalised source of human suffer-

ing is a false and unbiblical approach which actually multiplies human pain through the persecution of suspected witches, as well as the neglect of real causes and cures.

On the other hand, it means constantly underlining two critical biblical truths: that the creator God is sovereign over all that he has made, including every occult power; and that the victory Christ has gained over Satan and all the powers of evil through his death and resurrection, has secured the liberation of his people from their grip. 'For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' (Col 1:13-14). Third, it means stressing the absolutely primary role of human rebellion and sin in bringing disease and suffering into the world.

There is, however, another dimension to be considered, which goes beyond the teaching of truth and seeks to address the common life of God's people. Witchcraft accusations reflect tensions and relational breakdowns in human communities; they breed and multiply in the noxious atmosphere of interpersonal suspicion, animosity, resentment and hatred. For that reason anthropological approaches to witchcraft have often tended to see witchcraft accusation as a major way of articulating and dealing with human conflicts.[28]

However, while there may be some validity in that argument, such accusations do nothing to heal divided communities but tend rather to make division permanent. They sustain a climate of suspicion, fear and hostility, and all too often lead to violence and even murder. Consequently, a major element of any Christian response to witchcraft belief and accusation must be the pursuit of harmony, forgiveness and reconciliation. 'The church must develop methods to deal with the suppressed hostility that spawns and sustains witchcraft.'[29]

God's people need to live out the reality of the gospel, and so to be communities of reconciliation themselves that they are able to function without hypocrisy as light and salt in the wider society. The role of leadership within the church will therefore be not only that of more profoundly communicating truth, vital though that is, but also of so fostering a climate and practice of love, forbearance and reconciliation among the people of God that the discourse of witchcraft will simply become redundant.

3. HIV-AIDs and sin

All illness is 'the effluent of the fall, the result of a fallen world'.[30] In the case of HIV-AIDS there is often a direct and obvious causal link between moral failure and the onset of disease. This means that a major element of the Christian response lies in communicating how

28 M. Marwick, 'The Social Context of Cewa Witch Beliefs', *Africa* 22 (1952), 120-35 and 215-33, is a major exponent of this approach. See also M. Marwick, *Sorcery in its Social Setting: a Study of the Northern Rhodesian Cewa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965).

29 Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 174.

30 Carson, *How Long, O Lord*, 48, quoted above.

God intends that the good gift of human sexuality should be employed. It is surely true that if sexual promiscuity were eliminated, HIV-AIDS would progressively, and perhaps quite rapidly, disappear. Once again the biblical notion of wisdom is central, the pursuit of a style of life which moves with the flow of God's creation, rather than behaving in self-destructive defiance of it.

However, HIV-AIDS still shares in the ambiguity that characterises human suffering in general. Thus, faithful spouses or newborn babies may suffer as the result of the wrongdoing of others, while unwitting transfer of the virus may take place through careless use of unsterile needles or the transfusion of infected blood, and so on. Simply and invariably to attribute HIV-AIDS to particular preceding moral sin will, therefore, in many cases be inappropriate, as well as pastorally disastrous.

In pastoral terms this means that sufferers and their families need care at both the medical and spiritual levels. Counsel is vital, including the sensitive probing of the circumstances which have brought the patient to his or her present condition. In all cases, pastoral support will include prayer, and encouragement that is rooted in the truth of the liberating gospel of hope. In some cases it may mean forgiveness on the part of those who have been terribly wronged by the faithlessness of a partner in the most intimate of human relationships; in other cases it will mean confession of sin and repentance.

However, underlying it all there must be an explicit recognition, communication and understanding of the unlimited and transforming grace of God as it is displayed on the cross. The violation of God's law may often be the cause of 'evil and AIDS', but it is his grace in Christ that provides the ultimate and uniquely complete response, as it does for all human sin and pain. In this area as in all others the children of God need faithfully to reflect the heart of their Father 'who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all' (Rom 8:32). It is the 'reckless grace' of the prodigal God which alone offers true hope.[31] 'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him' (Lk 15:20).

31 T. Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), xv.