

"BUT IF IT IS BY THE FINGER OF GOD THAT I CAST OUT DEMONS..." (LUKE 11: 20): EXEGETICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE AFRICAN SPIRIT-WORLD.

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The Text: Lk 11:20

But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you (The African Bible, 1999).

M'ó buru site na mkpisi aka Chukwu kam si achupu ajo mmuo, Oputara n'Ala-eze Chukwu erutala unu (Igbo, Translation, mine)¹⁸¹.

Lakini, ikiwa mimi natoa pepo kwa kidole cha Mungu, basi ufalme wa Mungu umekwisha kuwajilia (Kishwahili).¹⁸²

Empa ha ke leleka bademona ka monoana oa Molimo, ruri 'Muso oa Molimo o fihlile ho lona. (Sesotho)¹⁸³

Abstract

This article focuses on the cryptic text of Luke 11:20 where Jesus employs the ancient Hebraic slogan, "by the finger of God" to perform exorcism in his day. Our method is exegetical. Our purpose is to demonstrate some level of interest in emerging creativity and change in contemporary contextual biblical scholarship in Africa. The significance and value of the Redactional hand of the evangelist, Luke, in re-shaping the theology of the verse to suit his gentile audience is acknowledged. The Intercultural Hermeneutical approach helps us to interpret Luke's insights for our culturally alert present-day African Bible readers to understand what Luke says in Chapter 11 verse 20 in a new light. We anchor our perspectives in the realities of the African social locations/context in order to claim that any people's religio-cultural traditions should be utilized as critical resources and basis for meaningful exegesis and hermeneutics tailored to address own specific contexts. Thus, our context of interpretation is the heart of the African social-religious and cultural cosmologies. The paper concludes on the significance of Luke's use of this bizarre Hebrew expression, finger of God. It is noted that the expression is a literary device patterned on the Hebrew narrative of the magic-wand utilized by Pharaoh's magicians in Ex 8: 15-19 to inform his readership that God speaks through sacred writings, in sacred words, sacred objects and that these phenomena are not in the lack in the African environment.

Keywords: Evangelists, Christology, Superpower, Social Locations, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Cosmology, Impersonal Mystical Forces, Finger of God.

Introduction

In recent New Testament scholarship, it has become increasingly acceptable that the Septuagint (LXX) based on a pre-Christian Hebrew textual tradition different from the Masoretic text was the *Catechism Book* of the earliest Christian churches.¹⁸⁴ On this assertion, the consensus is quite weighty as there are numerous quotations and paraphrases from the Greek version of the *TANACH* present in the Christian Bible (NT) thus suggesting that the LXX had lent itself too readily to earliest Christian use and interpretation.¹⁸⁵ As the Bible of Greek-speaking Christians from the early apostolic age, the Church Fathers were convinced that the prophetic vision of the LXX was the Word of God. Christian exegesis of what God himself had meant in speaking through the prophets is found in the writings of most of the evangelists and later New Testament authors who had assumed, on the basis of this tradition, that the LXX in its entirety was meaningful and relevant for their own time and contexts. In support of this view, M. Müller advises: “it is a historical fact that, for about a hundred years of its earliest history, the Christian Church shared...the Bible with Judaism”.¹⁸⁶ Further expatiating, Müller asserts:

Apparently they used not only the Hebrew Bible text, but, to an even greater extent, its translation into Greek, which had been created in the third and second centuries BCE¹⁸⁷

Aim and Purpose

The central aim and purpose of my paper coheres in the reflection of the LXX in the writings of Luke, the author of the Third Gospel and Acts, himself an educated Hellenistic convert to Christianity in the first century of the Common Era. This is no longer a subject of doubt.¹⁸⁸ *Re-reading* the Greek Bible for the emerging Christian churches in the Gentile missions where the majority of converts were of Hellenistic Jewish extraction, it is notable that Luke had consciously *re-utilized, adopted and midrashed* a segment of the Moses-Pharaoh cycle in the Book of Exodus in order to present an *inculturated* Christology for his Christian community.¹⁸⁹ His purpose is, *inter alia*, to promote a theology of divine empowerment to solidify and edify the faith of his original audience. He also aims at teaching his congregations how best they should understand the miracles and exorcisms performed by Jesus in the light of their religious tradition. For Luke, such prodigies stand out as acts empowered by God and the Holy Spirit. In his understanding, and as it seems, this is what he is mindful of conveying; namely that Jesus’ victory over demonic forces are God’s handwork which remains a sign of the arrival and presence of the Reign of God among the suffering members of his Church¹⁹⁰. For Luke, Jesus is the New Moses whose power is *Superpower*.

In the light of above, this paper is a combination of *Redaction Criticism and Intercultural Hermeneutics*. With both approaches, we venture to probe the text’s oral stage and its prehistory

in order to try to uncover how Luke, the evangelist had re-shaped and moulded his source material so much so that his theology exhibits strong lines of cultural similarity, comparability and affinity not only with ancient Jewish religious and legendary traditions but also with the Greco-Roman cultural life-world in which those who first *heard* and *read* his gospel had lived, moved about and had their being. To achieve this, we set ourselves the task of evaluating how Luke's redaction and theology are *re-readable* in African socio-religious and cultural contexts. This quest constitutes the centre-piece of our article.¹⁹¹

Context of Interpretation: The African Spirit-World

The specific context in which we wish to *re-read* this verse hails from our African cosmology. In this way, we wish to demonstrate interest in some emerging creativity and change in contemporary contextual biblical scholarship in Africa. Upon realising the significance and value of the *Redactional* hand of Luke, the evangelist, in re-shaping the theology of the verse to suit his gentile audience, our home-grown approach, the *Intercultural Hermeneutics* helps us to interpret his insights to our own audience.¹⁹² *Intercultural hermeneutical* approach helps culturally alert present-day African Bible readers to understand what Luke is saying in Chapter 11 verse 20 in a new light; especially one which European exegetes have not been used to reading from such a Lukan text. Thus, our context of interpretation is the heart of the African social-religious and cultural worldviews.

It has become common knowledge that in spite of the great stride Christian Religion is making in contemporary Africa, belief in occult powers and supply of *muti* as in parts of southern Africa is still on the rise and getting very popular; especially among the political and the business class. The practice by which many people enter into mystery covenant to dine and wine with the habitats of menacing paranormal forces that are believed to pervade Africa is on the increase.¹⁹³ Their bondage to "magical presences and forces" wields so much influence on their lives and even drives them to engage in nefarious cultic activities in many parts of the continent. For some of the traditionalists; especially those who engage in occult consultations and demonic practices in some of the monarchical traditions in southwestern Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Lesotho as well as the flamboyant managers of occult shrines at the Okija sanctuary in south-eastern Nigeria, the powers in the world-in-between and spirit entities are seriously believed to be real. In Lesotho, the *Baloi* made up of both men and women occultists manipulate the supernatural to commit evil actions regularly as they invoke evil forces to prosper or to incapacitate some Basotho people.¹⁹⁴ In many riverine areas of the West African sub-region, ritual killings dedicated to *Mammie Water* (Mermaids, the water spirits) are cultivated with impunity for money-making. In South-eastern Lesotho as well, water is believed to be imbued with spiritual potency and egregious witchdoctors like Khotso Sethuntsa would descend under water (River Senqu) to enhance their spiritual energies and later become capacitated to carry out riverside rituals for blessings or for curses. It is also believed that "in the waters inhabit spiritual personages, many which are serpentine" from which Khotso used to send "a creature with a serpentine body and horse's head" after his enemies at night.¹⁹⁵ Khotso, the mountain magician, had the potency to "call up tornado to wreak havoc on enemies", to turn the storms of Lesotho to work his will and worse, to hurl lightning at someone and as much, he offered "medicines for political power" to jingoists who sought his patronage.

This phenomenon assures us that many African peoples believe that “unseen” forces; the impersonal mystical powers, exist and are endowed with forces which can be tapped to do good as well as to do evil. Many Christians and committed church-goers are believed to be bewitched and demonically possessed by “sent” portents. Several young people have given their lives to occult practices and engage themselves in Satanic rituals in and outside some of Africa’s citadels of learning. The Mungiki Boys in Kenya, the Bakassi Boys in south-eastern Nigeria, the Odua Peoples Congress in Yorubaland Nigeria, the Egbesu Boys of Uroboland in Delta State, Nigeria and other ethnic militias in Burundi and in the Katanga province of the DRC, cling to eerie and esoteric cultures as they execute and perform subtle dysfunctional activities in society. Among cultists, it is believed and as is being demonstrated regularly in Nigeria’s contemporary film industry, the Nollywood, that members barter their lives or those of close relatives; even their mothers and wives for wealth and riches granted by capricious mystical forces and their cohorts

The churches are not spared in these scary beliefs. The Nigerian religious landscape is one known to be demon-full, hence the increasing emergence of the so-called “men of God” who multiply themselves as deliverance ministers, pastor-healers, priest-healers and prophet/ess-healers. These so-called “men of God” brandish and proclaim their clairvoyant powers of exorcistic ministrations before tumultuous crowds at their crusade grounds and open-air rallies. These divines have succeeded in transferring the fear of witches and wizards to the “devil”, a rather curious Middle Eastern religious figure quite unknown in African Indigenous Religions in pristine times. In the Indigenous Religion of the Yoruba, a densely populated race in south-western Nigeria, *Esu* is believed to be crafty, cruel, powerful and the brain behind all good things as well as all bad things to humans. In human history,¹⁹⁶ women in Yoruba towns and villages do not, even today, move about at night for fear of *oros*, petty and worrisome spirits that cause people; especially pregnant women, different kinds of diseases such as swollen legs and partial blindness. Among the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria, *Ekwensu*, an evil spirit closest to *Uru-Chi* is a being that is essentially regarded as evil¹⁹⁷. Among the Hausa-Fulani peoples of northern Nigeria, *Iblis*, a Quranic loan-name, is used to describe the agent of every disaster, calamity, misery and woes that befall humankind.¹⁹⁸ Many clerics strongly believe that the source of evil in our society is from the spiritual forces, evil spirits and demons which they believe to be commonplace in the environment. In that light, they boast of their exorcistic charismata and beguile the over-credulous Africans with the exhibitions of such powers in their crusade sessions, open-air rallies and at several Redemption Camps scattered all over the African nations. Many more of them proclaim the reality of demons, Satans, *Owu-mmiri* (water spirits) and *Mammie-waters* (Mermaids).¹⁹⁹ Among the Pentecostals and the Charismatics of the New Religious Movements is a hard belief in the prevalence of satanic forces and the impending apocalyptic debacle with evil agents in the African world. In short, the preachers create the impression that the land is infested with a pantheon of evil spirits that roam the streets, roads, rivers, markets and even churches and personal houses not only seeking whom to devour but wreaking spiritual, physical and financial havoc to the people of God and the African states. It is in the spirit of the current belief that John S. Pobee, the eminent Ghanaian theologian, could correctly assert that “the issue of witchcraft goes to the heart of the African psyche.”²⁰⁰ African societies, he further argues, is like the biblical-Semitic

world; both which manifest a religious and spiritual perception of reality.²⁰¹ As the principal investigator has elsewhere argued, “the conception of the being of Satan among some African peoples is not altogether distant from their cosmologies; especially their socio-religious perceptions of the problem of evil and its causality⁴²⁰²

Our exploration of the religious terrain of most regions of Africa, west, east and south, indicate that the reality of belief in the existence of demons, occult practices and witchcraft is quite widespread in traditional and modern Africa. This fact surely makes a reader of some of the passages of the New Testament to readily believe that the cultural world of the eastern Mediterranean which most New Testament books reflect share a common spiritual and demonic worldviews with those of Africa. If this perspective is comparably acceptable as we think it should, then the interpretation of Luke’s affirmation of the power of Jesus over demons that menaced the people of his time stands as a Lukan model in the quest for well-rounded and sound hermeneutics and theology of the evangelist in Africa. Trained Bible teachers can adopt the model to reverse and to combat contemporary beliefs in demonology in African Christianity. According to the evangelist, Jesus is the new Moses who has been invested with the power inherent in the *finger of God* to execute the arrestation and expulsion of demons and their acolytes. The popular chorus: “Jesus’ Power, Super Power; Satan’s Power, powerless power” impresses us as one such example of Christian Praise-Songs that vindicates many a faithful’s credo in Jesus’ superhuman power to do battle with the occult world for God and for Africa’s contemporary Christianity.

The Religio-cultural Background of Luke’s Story

In ancient Hebrew culture and religion, belief in evil spirits or demons; especially the *Shadim* and the *Sairim* who live in dark corners and maraud the wilderness ever ready to inflict harm on people was quite commonplace. Literary sources such as folklore, oral literature and popular belief bear witness to the exploits of demonic powers in the Hebrew life-world.²⁰³ In late Judaism; especially after the level of Hellenization the society had undergone, belief in the power of evil spirits generally became quite ubiquitous. As the spirits were believed to be readily conjured up by evil-doers to take possession of and afflict people, the practice of exorcism boomed. Many exorcists thrived and claimed the power to heal physical illnesses, social distresses and spiritual anxieties of all sorts.²⁰⁴ In the Hellenistic period, there were well-known healers and great divine-men like Asklepius of Epidaurus and Apollonius of Tyana.²⁰⁵ The extant Epidaurian inscriptions indicate that there were ancient doctors, psychiatrists as well as patients and patronisers. In the case of the Epidaurian Healing Centre, its Abaton Hall was then world famous where real sufferers of paralysis, blindness, deafness, dumbness, growths, wounds and ulcers were healed over night by Asklepius.²⁰⁶

Early Christianity was influenced by these Jewish and Hellenistic traditional ideas and beliefs. In the Palestine of Jesus’ day, the ancient Hebrew belief in the dysfunctional role of the *Shadim* became spiritualized and conceived to belong to the domain of the occult. The belief, among others, that the spirits attacked humankind by taking possession of them was widespread. Other types of spirits caused seizures, panic and destructive violence to humankind. It was even believed that some demons caused the possessed to blaspheme against their fundamental beliefs. New

Testament authors took the existence of demons and unclean spirits very seriously. Many Christians of those days considered the spirit entities as members of the family of the fallen angels²⁰⁷. Jesus shared this cosmology. And so commonplace was the beliefs in the Gentile world where Paul had evangelized the people. According to Wayne Meeks, ‘The human world is seen under the control of demonic powers’²⁰⁸. In 2 Cor 4:4, we read that Satan is the “god of this aeon”. Unseen beings (rulers) and authorities (Col 2:15; Eph 6:12-17; Col 2:20) are identified as elements of the cosmos. Socialized in this cosmology and religious worldview, the early Christians considered the gods and mediums of the Gentile peoples as impersonal mystical forces that incarnate themselves in demons like Beelzebub (Acts 16:16; 1 Cor 10: 20-21; Rev 9: 20). The *Pastors* of the Pastoral Epistles had proclaimed in their churches that such spirit-beings had the potency to divert the attention of the faithful from hearing and accepting the gospel (1 Tim 4:1). For them, it was of pastoral expedience to alert the members of their communities that those spirit entities are opposed to the reign of God. This was the ancient religious tradition derived from the cultural world and the thought-form of the age. In sum, this disquisition has helped us identify a commonality between the context in which the exorcism of Jesus was performed and the African context against which Jesus’ encounter with Beelzebub, ‘the prince of demons’ is going to be *re- read* in the rest of this paper.

A Brief Exegetical Analysis of Lk 11: 20

In this section, we wish to present a critical analysis of Lk 11:20 in a fivefold form; namely, the original Greek text as found in the Greek New Testament, 1979 edition, the English translation readable by many Africans offered in *The African Bible*, (Nairobi, 1999), an Igbo translation carefully rendered by the principal investigator, himself an Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria from the Greek original, a Kishwahili text, the *lingua franca* in Eastern Africa and the language of Western missionary enterprise and education in mission schools and finally the *Sesotho* Bible text in general use among the Basotho Christians in the Kingdom of Lesotho . These five texts reflect how the Word of God is being spread and appreciated in contemporary African Christianity.

Most commentators consider the use of the expression, *en daktulo Theou - the finger of God*; a Lukan creation quite different from Matthew’s ‘Spirit of God’ in his own Gospel. Because of the absence of the enigmatic expression, R. H. Gundry accepts the text as the presence of a number of Mattheanisms²⁰⁹. Other critics base their arguments on the fact that what is transmitted in a parallel passage in Matt 12: 28 – *en pneumati Theou - the Spirit of God* is un-Matthean. David T. Williams wants us to believe that the “finger” was employed to signify “a picture of the Spirit”.²¹⁰ Are we here really confronted with Lukan omission, substitution, re-interpretation or fidelity to the traditional legend or source? Let us see if the analysis that follows will help us establish any convincing and reliable information on this critical question.

There is no doubt that the saying is quite archaic given the absence of such a phrase in Mark generally accepted as the first Gospel and one used by the Synoptists (Mk 3,23-27)²¹¹. Even in some major African languages where the phrase is quite complex to explain, translators have rendered the expression as *kidole cha Mungu* (Kishwahili), *mkipisiri aka Chukwu* (Igbo), *owo Olorun* (Yoruba) and finally *monoana oa Molimo* (Sesotho). By so doing, the phrase has not been disoriented. This fact has made it possible to win the approval of the United Bible Societies Translation Team in parts of Africa as Africans' creative skill and ingenuity in social linguistic recreation. Indeed African translators would easily hold the phrase as a symbolic expression of the mystery of Jesus' power in "what God was doing through him" and not as "black magic" mediated through "cooperation with the evil powers of darkness...but rather as R. Summers amplifies "the genuine demonstration of the good powers of light, the indication that the very rule of God in the lives of men, his kingdom, was present."²¹²

In everyday labour experience, Africans are known to work with hands but finger is hardly employed to express any sort of work done without the other fingers of a person. A finger would rather be seen as a collaborative organ. A finger cannot alone be used to perform any significant operation. Among the Igbo and many other African people, one needs all the five even the ten fingers to carry out active and successful labour otherwise referred to as *uru aka* – work done with the hands as the Igbo would usually describe such jobs. The collaborative efforts of all the fingers may further be explained with an Igbo proverb that states: *otu mkpisi aka ritalu manu zuru ibe ya ahu* (one finger fetches the oil that smears the rest). This folk saying supposes that the fingers by their closeness to each other cannot but function unitarily, in other words, all fingers are needed to perform effective manual labour. By no means was the finger for most Africans an aspect of divine activity either in traditional religious practices or in social clubs. More often than not, what is reckoned with is the hand, *aka* as an ensignia of collective power among the Igbo of Nigeria.²¹³ Understood in this sense, we would believe that the expression in its original Greek version also reflects a primitive idiom that probably goes back to an Aramaic cultural setting where, like most Africans, finger is used to express acts done in a collaborative synergy to prosper a person's or the people's wellbeing in the community.

There are three other logia stressing the demonstration of Jesus' superhuman power in the Lukan tradition. The sayings are sandwiched within the context of the exorcisms of Jesus; namely the Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit in Lk 11: 18-19 and parallels, the Dealing with Beelzebub in Lk 11:21-22 and parallels and the Binding of the Strong man in Lk 11: 21-23). In all these four passages, including the text under study, Jesus is depicted as doing battle against the demonic forces instead of meddling with them as some people of our age in Nigeria, Kenya, Lesotho and elsewhere in Africa do today. But were the battles manually waged? How, may Christians in Africa where many peoples' worldviews are believed to be nearly identical with that of the Jews understand this mysterious statement? It is our hope that the bizarre expression, *finger of God*, was not borrowed from ancient Egyptian esoteric and apocryphal oracular work: *The Six and Seven Books of Moses* usually associated with magical conjurations and invocations by demon worshippers and certain believers in occult practices perhaps derived from oriental mystery religions. A better understanding of what is meant can become clearer if Lk 11: 15 where Jesus' power to do exorcism was ascribed to Beelzebub is fairly interpreted from the vision Africans conceive and understand the concept as discussed above. This would be part of our creativity and

change to justify Afrocentric biblical scholarship. Hence, *by the finger of God*, may expediently be taken as in cooperation with God to usher in the reign of God in the human society. But in response to his critics, Jesus makes an *ad hominem* argument (vv.17-19). He retorts by asserting that the fact that Jewish people of that age practiced magical exorcisms was not good enough reason to accuse him of being a magician. Jesus makes the Pharisees realize that it was grossly illogical to conclude that he (Jesus) performed his exorcisms through the power of demons. For if he belonged to the demonic household, the critics should have realized that “division leads to destruction” as there would be no unity in the occultic household.²¹⁴ Pertinently Perkins observes that “In Jesus’ view it is totally illogical for the prince of demons to drive out demons and thereby erode his own power. It is tantamount to civil war”²¹⁵ Thus Luke makes him deny that his source of power was from the type his contemporaries had employed. In sum, Luke is, in this unit, telling his audience as well as the Jewish Religious Leaders that Jesus performed his own exorcisms by the „finger of God“; that is, by a direct intervention of God and to herald that “the Kingdom of God has come” to them.²¹⁶

Now, can we, with intercultural hermeneutics creatively seek out where this expression was derived? Is it an occult language associated with some syncretistic Jewish charlatans or was it a prevailing religio-cultural idiom native to the Palestinian environment? As we have noted, the statement is absent in the parallel text in Mark’s gospel. Hence Lk 11:19-20/Matt 12:27-28 should be discussed together, at least, the narrative is a Q material independently received by the two evangelists. Once this is ‘seen together’, that is, synoptically “eye-marked”, the ocean of difference between Beelzeboul and God who is working in Jesus becomes glaringly apparent. What is however stressed in the statement, in fact, is that some Jews who had engaged in exorcistic activities had derived their powers from doubtful sources as some witchdoctors and wizards in today’s Africa are known to do. Consequently, it may be queried if it is the performing of exorcism that really mattered or the converting power of the word of God and its real significance in the life of the people? We believe the answer must be sought in further investigation of the Lukan intention for re-telling the Q-story to his audience.

We may not advance to the interpretation of the text without exposing the narrative structure of the Beelzebub Controversy as the third edition of the *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition*, edited by Kurt Aland, UBS, 1979, pp. 172-173 captions it. The Lukan version of the story can literarily be sub-divided as follows:

- vv. 14-16 - the actual healing of the dumb person, who spoke, followed by the marvel of the people. The negative criticism of “the people”; or the *Pharisees as per* Matthew (Matt 12: 24) and the critical demand of (*semeion ex ouranou*) a sign from heaven.

- vv. 17-20 - Jesus' re-action and response to the faithless people. His categorical declaration of divine empowerment in his ministries and exorcisms.
- vv. 21-23 Jesus' parable of the Strongman who must guard himself against the attack of Satan or the robbers sealed with his warning to the disciple.

For interpretative purposes, we wish to grapple particularly with the elucidation of v. 20; this cryptic verse received and transmitted by Luke in his own account of the Beelzeboul Controversy. As readers in the twenty-first century church and society, we invite the readers to follow us retrieve the Lukan intended meaning for the members of his community. The approach will help us to see how Luke's insight can assist our *re-reading* of the passage for the faithful of today and for ordinary readers of the Gospel of Luke in Africa. There is no doubt that Jesus performed exorcisms during his earthly ministry. All the four Gospels attest to his victorious encounters with demons, Satan, evil spirits and devils. Most of these accounts are not necessarily those aspects of New Testament theology typical of early Christian spiritualization of the Jesus phenomenon but rather convincing historical accounts of the activities of the Jesus of history which initially circulated orally. Our interest is to put it before our readers to know how Luke interprets this particular exorcism of Jesus. A balanced exegetical analysis of the Lukan *intentio auctoris* becomes very crucial in order to creatively respond to this question in the light of the African spirit worldview. Its clear exposition will clarify our understanding of earliest Christians' process of *re-reading* an activity of Jesus.

In the Q-community at Antioch, Jesus' exorcisms must have been seen as the means by which the reign of God was being ushered in amongst the members of that spirit-filled, vibrant and charismatic community. In the exorcisms of Jesus, God was himself working through him to relieve the community from the tyranny of demonic personages who planned and executed Christian oppression and persecutions in that city, the third largest in the Roman Empire according to the Jewish historian, Josephus.²¹⁷ For the Q-church, the Spirit was a living reality that energized the members to engage in powerful prayer-sessions. On one of such occasions, the Spirit fell and the charismatic leaders of that church rose to designate Paul and Barnabas to initiate the earliest and far-flung Christian missionary enterprise in the Gentile world. Here, the notion of the Spirit as mediating realized eschatology was quite at home. Indeed, the Q-church was a Spirit-driven congregation.²¹⁸

Besides this Antiochian tradition, both the Lukan and the Matthean accounts offer us insights into the specific traditional understanding of the notion, "power of God" through the use of such ancient categories as by the *finger of God* or by the *Spirit of God*. But since both evangelists either drew their materials from Mark and Q or had their special sources, how may we know whose version is really authentic? There is no doubt that both Matthew and Luke transmit sound Christology of the incident. One important aspect of creativity we wish to bring about to bear on *re-reading* the passage lies in our interest to establish which evangelist has freely and deliberately exercised literary freedom in the re-interpretative process, a fact which can inspire contemporary African preachers and evangelists to recognize the validity of contextualization. In spite however of this boon, the question still is: whose version is more primitive and why? Could it be Luke's or

Matthew's? Rudolf Bultmann concedes that the Lukan version is rather primitive due to its archaic opening with a parabolic story in Lk 11, 5-13 (The Persistent Friend at Midnight).²¹⁹ According to him, the Lukan expression, *finger of God* comes essentially from Q and on this, Marshall is in agreement.²²⁰ This Bultmannian position has won the acceptance of most contemporary Western Synoptic scholars who agree that when Luke and Matthew are using the Q-Source, Luke remains more faithful to the original source. But can we still maintain this hypothesis all the time and in all cases even in the developing thoughts of African Christianity where most preachers thumb through the Bible and preach out of context of the texts? Are we really sure that Luke has, in all probability, preserved the more primitive form of the Q-dictum in this text? Our hesitation derives from the fact that Luke had long been identified as the evangelist of the Spirit and women.²²¹ If the theme of the Spirit is so saliently central in Luke's theology, why would he delete it from the source he was using here? Many commentators would want us to believe that it appears improbable to accept that Luke would have replaced "Spirit" with "finger" if he had seen "Spirit" in the Q tradition at his disposal when composing his story. For us, in view of the cultural and charismatic background of the Q-document, that is, the Antiochian Church as its provenance, there is hardly any doubt that Luke saw "Spirit" in the Q-Source but as the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria say: *a hu ihe k'ubi, e ree oba* (when one sees what is greater than the farmland, one sells the barn to acquire it).

It can be argued that the evangelists, as *redactors* exercised a lot of literary flexibility with their sources when they composed their gospels. Thus at this occasion and in the light of his biblical theological interests; namely a purposeful intention to propound a *Christology of Power*, Luke decidedly preferred to substitute "finger" in place of Spirit²²²; indeed an interpretative effort that hacks back to the Exodus experience (Ex 8.19). We are convinced that Luke intended to speak with a rather familiar language-register to his audience or readership.²²³ Why? This is because the expression, *finger of God* reflects a traditional usage, the instance of an anthropomorphism typical of the Old Testament religion by which the Priestly (P) authors had castigated the Egyptians as their magicians intended "to avoid Pharaoh's anger at their inability" to perform what Moses did.²²⁴

In this light, we are of the opinion that the phrase is a Semitic idiom, indeed a pre-Lukan concept which has its background in the context of primitive Hebrew theology of divine intervention recorded in Ex 7: 11 – 8: 19. The phrase, though cryptic as it appears, is also used in Dt 9, 10 to describe divine power in inscribing the Ten Words (Commandments) on the stone tablets given to Moses at Mount Horeb or at Mount Sinai (Exod 31,18). So, it may be taken that the *finger of God* is a well-known religious symbolism for God's empowerment of chosen figures. And in each case, it is Moses and Aaron who are the central figures that are referred to in that text. In Lk 20: 14-23, victory over demons is ascribed to Jesus by the *Finger of God* hence He (Jesus) is, for Luke and to his audience, the New Moses. For us, these are some of the religio-cultural and historical reasons why we identify with Luke's adoption of the expression, *finger of God* as a referent for divine empowerment. As we had earlier pointed out, Luke's audience was most probably situated in a region where the LXX was well used in the Daily Readings as was the custom of Diaspora Jews. By the time he wrote his gospel, Jewish converts had become quite numerous in the early

Hellenistic Christianity. The evangelist, as well as his community would surely be familiar with the Greek version of Dt 9: 10 where the the Lord gave Moses the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Words were written with the *finger of God* and Ex 8:19 where the statement below was reported by Pharaoh's priests:

DEUT: 9: 10 kai. e;dwken ku,rioj evmoi. ta.j du,o pla,kaj ta.j liqi,naj gegramme,naj *evn tw/l daktu,lw/ tou/qeou/* kai. evpV auvtai/j evge,grapto pa,ntej oi` lo,goi ou]j evla,lhsen ku,rioj pro.j u`ma/j evn tw/| o;rei h`me,ra| evkklhsi,aj

Exod 8:19

kai. dw,sw diastolh.n avna. me,son tou/ evmou/ laou/ kai. avna. me,son tou/ sou/ laou/ evn de. th/| au;rion e;stai to. shmei/on tou/to evpi. th/j gh/j

In Rahlfs 1982 *Septuaginta*, we read:

*Eipan oun hoi epaidoi to Pharao, daktulos Theou esti touto*²²⁵

So the charmers said to Pharaoh, This is the finger of God.

But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not to them, as the Lord said.

The third plague of *kinnim*, a hapax in the whole of the Hebrew Bible, occurred when Aaron struck the dust with his staff and the dust became flying biting insects the gnats (*nkanka* (Igbo), *finfin* (Yoruba), *menoang* (Sesotho) waser infested on the entire land of Egypt (Ex 8:12-16). With these swarming pesky insects, the Lord polluted the Egyptian priesthood who prided themselves of their purity. Here, the Egyptian magicians and wizards “unable to duplicate this miracle” reported to Pharaoh that the infestation of the land with gnats was the handwork of the Hebrew God, the Supreme and Mighty God through whose power, his servants, Moses and Aaron worked greater miracles than themselves.²²⁶ The miracle of the Hebrew leaders proved that they, as messengers of the Israelite God, had access to divine power²²⁷. In fact, the expression found in the mouth of the Egyptian magicians was to extoll God's power that enabled the miracle to have been wrought. Again, notice must be taken of the fact that in its literary context in the Book of Exodus, the expression is uttered by the Egyptian priesthood, the opponents of the People of God (Israel) who had recognized that astounding prodigies had been wrought by the Hebrew God through the persons and mission of Moses and Aaron.

In his Gospel, Luke reverses the situation. The expression is put in the mouth of Jesus who uses the phrase, *Finger of God* to allude to his miracle and to challenge his critics and opponents to turn towards conversion to God whose intervention in the plight of the oppressed has dawned in his person, ministry and the dawn of the Kingdom of God. Aware of the redactional discretion of the evangelist and as we had earlier stated (*a hu ihe k' ubi eree oba*), Luke had changed the more primitive notion, “Spirit”, indeed a Q- concept in preference to *finger*, - a term uttered by a rather perplexed non monotheists in the Exodus narrative. Luke's intention is to put a biblical touch on

the story. His ultimate interest is to ground the episode in the religio-cultural setting of the ancient Hebrews in order to help his community whose members were largely of Hebrew extraction to come to recognize the power of God behind the miracles of Jesus..²²⁸

Besides this, there is another theological reason why Luke re-interpreted the Antiochian pneumatology also received by Matthew.²²⁹ A thorough survey of the evangelist's phraseology indicates that *en pneumatī Theou* (by the Spirit of God) is inconsistent with Lukan theology of the Spirit. In Luke, the Spirit of God is not an eschatological reality as in Matthew where it usually represents the presence of the kingdom of God. In Luke, the Spirit of God is rather a substitute for the reign of God which was ushered in through the ministry of Jesus. Besides, in Luke, the notion of *en pneumatī Theou* is a divine force that works miracles. For Luke, the concept, *pneumatōs* is rather a prophetic Spirit often associated with Jesus as the one to whom the prophetic scriptures point.²³⁰ For Luke's Diaspora Jewish audience, the Spirit is not known as an exorcist but the notion, *en daktulo Theou*, *finger of God*, is an anthropomorphism quite duly acceptable by all.²³¹

Given the religio-cultural, traditional, redactional and theological argumentations submitted above, we wish to settle with the view that the evangelist, Luke had purposefully substituted the pristine symbolic notion, *finger of God* to take the place of the rather theological concept, *Spirit of God* in his narrative on Jesus' Battle Against Beelzeboul. What he has successfully achieved is the use of *substitution* as a literary device to re-interpret the exorcistic activity of Jesus. Luke's purpose is to educate the faith of a church whose members highly revered their religio-cultural heritage. Suffice it to say that Luke wished his church members to understand the exorcisms of Jesus in the light of an Exodus experience. This Christology would naturally augur well with the Hellenistic Jewish Christians' perception for whom a pre-Christian version of the LXX had been the Bible of their congregations.²³² This is the way he *re-interpreted* that superhuman miracle of Jesus represents the "arrival of the kingdom of God" for the Christians of his day. Surely his account has relevance for African Christians of today. Our hermeneutics will be articulated in the reflections that follow.

Our Reflections

Can this early Christian hermeneutics provide us with the foundation to *re-comprehend* the text of this passage for the People of God in our own time; especially for those faith people who believe that demons still lurk behind every nook and cranny of the African space and environment? We believe that, more importantly, the relevance of this paper addresses itself to the people in our societies and churches who believe that witchdoctors must be befriended, worshipped, patronized and served for wealth and power acquisition. It also speaks correctly to people who believe that their role to drive demons and all hindrances to success is caused by the demons. In most Pentecostal and some Charismatic churches such as that of Prophet T.B. Joshua of the Synagogue of All Nations (SCOAN), Lagos, Nigeria, every service includes a demon delivery service and Healing Ministrations in the Name of Jesus. Extrapolating from the Lukan perspective, we wish to demonstrate that the observation of some Western scholars that the centre of gravity of world Christianity has shifted decisively to the southern hemisphere

is definitely getting correct.²³³ For much too long, Europe and North America have furnished Africa with theological methods, norms, concepts and points of reference even with a monopoly of doing the theological business. Some other western scholars have made us know that in the contemporary age there is need for theologians to shift focus on Africa, Asia and Latin America and have shown willingness to assist train biblical theologians who are/shall be skilled to operate from own contexts. We are not arguing that such scholars represent a movement that is asking us to cut links with the First World. What we are saying here is that a number of them stands out stalwartly as ecumenists and interculturalists who maintain that African contact with the West is not un-essential for the emergence of African home-grown theology. Given the wisdom in their counsel, we believe that there is need to anchor our perspectives in the realities of the African *social locations*/contexts in order to lay claim to the dictum that any people's religio-cultural traditions should be utilized as critical resources and basis for meaningful exegesis and hermeneutics that should address own specific contexts.

For us, Luke's use of the antiquated Hebrew expression, *finger of God*, has amply been demonstrated as a literary device patterned on the Hebrew narrative of the magic-wand utilized by Pharaoh's magicians in Ex 8: 15-19 to inform his hearers that God speaks through the sacred writings, in sacred words, sacred objects and also in places which are not in lack in the African environment as both Pobee and Ositelu attest that, "We are surrounded by hosts of spirit beings – some good, some bad – which are considered able to influence the course of human lives."²³⁴ Besides this, Luke adopts a copious use of anthropomorphisms as in the case of "the hand of God" in Lk 1:66/Acts 4:28,30; 7:50; 11:21; and 13:11. Other occurrences like the "arm of God" in Lk 1:31 and Acts 13:17 are significantly notable. All these Lukan expressions bear figurative significance as they surely draw our attention to the fact that "what Jesus was doing was done with the power of God".

Luke's use of Ex 8,15 vindicates the fact that there is continuity between the Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible and that the Hebrew Bible's theology foreshadows the nascent Christian theology. Above all, it is Luke's conviction that scripture is God's word. He represents that crop of early Christian evangelists who had recognized the validity of the Jewish Bible as a reservoir of divine accomplishment of ancient prophecies and revelations that were so re-interpreted in the light of the faith of the early Christians in Jesus, the Son of God and the Messiah. In sum, Müller is right to assert that Luke vindicates the fact that "the essence of Christian theology is the interpretation of scripture" and by scripture, the Hebrew Bible is meant.²³⁵

Intercultural Hermeneutics which we have adopted to *re-read* the text has helped reveal that earliest Christian evangelists and teachers had *re-interpreted* or *re-read* the Hebrew Bible giving it a Christian theological sense. In other words, the early church transformed the Jewish Bible and culture into the emerging Christian Bible and culture ²³⁶. This discovery finds expression in the recent submission offered by Jude Thaddaeus Ruwaichi that

...the reality of inculturation is as old as humanity or, if you like, as old as the History of Salvation. Besides, far from being a marginal reality it is an indispensable process. For that matter, failure to come to terms or accommodate adequately the reality and process of inculturation is tantamount to ecclesiastical suicide²³⁷

Ruwaich's supportive assertion behests us to begin earnestly to engage in the purification and assumption of African sacred traditions and wholesome language in our *theologizing* so that African theologians can creatively begin to propound viable local Christian theologies that address African contexts. What Luke has done in his time and for his Christian community supposes, as Ruwaichi further advises that:

whenever human beings are confronted with the task of living their faith in changing times and contexts, the reality of inculturation is somehow at play. The word of God affords us many instances of the efforts of God's people to reconcile their life and new contexts.²³⁸

In this light, we would not hesitate to say that we still have a lot to learn from the Lukan initiative in our quest for the relevance of inter-cultural hermeneutics in contemporary African Churches. There is another pertinent lesson this paper offers; namely that mainline Christians may not, after all, have to reject the sermons of the *ad hoc* preachers and pastors of the African Independent Churches (AICs), those of some Roman Catholic priest-healers and the clerics of other new generation churches who insist that demons both seen and unseen crowd the African environment and attribute all sorts of calamities to their agents in our society. We wish to agree with John S. Pobee and Ositelu that it is an essential function of religion to liberate humanity from the tyranny of evil forces and their cohorts.²³⁹ Clerical or ministerial formation of priests, pastors and preachers must take serious cognizance of the fact that the mission starts where the addressees of the good-news are. While the thinking of most traditional Africans may be congruent with what they read in some passages of the New Testament,²⁴⁰ it must be borne in mind that Jesus has once and for all times conquered the kingdom of the demons and has rendered them powerless before Christians; especially those who wear the true armour of Christ, the Victor.

While contemporary epistemology, namely, the way we know things, behests us to pay attention to the optics of modern science and technology and to recognize that advancement in modern medicine, psychotherapy, psychiatry and psychology as well as the increasingly acquired information from the developing skills in science and religion indicate that belief in the existence of occultic entities are tenable, we will be risking the sense of our apostolic tradition and faith to sheepishly follow the un-reflected scientific claims of the western mind. Clerics must lead the vanguard to address the hopes and fears of African Christians and to liberate the African mind from obsession in demon belief and worship in order to exorcize the African world.

There is no doubt that it is human and social evils that cause suffering, poverty and the rampant madness in our society. Of course, structural evils are by no means metaphysical nor are they caused by any demonic agencies. It is fellow humans, generally those who dine and wine with the elements of the unseen world that instill fear and panic in many unsuspecting Christian people. In

a Christian Africa, what is needed is a new and creative scriptural hermeneutics of the world-in-between than the phobia hitherto associated with it that has continued to grip many people of our contemporary age. It is the duty of the Church, its biblical scholars, theologians and its clerics to promote a rather positive interpretation of the Reign of God as a reality to be realized in our everyday life struggles. In the Reign of God preached and ushered in by Jesus, the realm of the evil one has been subdued, conquered and laid to rest. Of course, some empiricists would doubt our assertion. Jesus' words have reversed values and turned the demonic world upside down. The demons are vanquished and are surely rendered dismally impotent. This is Jesus' proclamation and promise that the Kingdom of God is already here in the midst of his followers. In the light of what we have stated above, we join E.A. Ituma to powerfully declare that

We need a balanced Christianity that seeks a re-interpretation of the Christian gospel to accommodate the social liberating power of Jesus in our political and socio-economic life. The present quest for security and political ascendancy through fetish means must be absolutely condemned by every Christian and the Christ of liberation applauded and embraced. A Christianity that does not see Jesus as a ... liberator is surely not the Christianity of the Bible.²⁴¹

Furthermore, it has to be emphasized for sister churches that, in the Roman Catholic Church, the existence of demons has neither been a doctrinally codified article of faith nor denied. As in the case of Satan, our investigation reveals that the existence of demons is narrated in biblical literature. We discover that such popular beliefs prevailed during the biblical age.²⁴² Adherents of African Indigenous Religion do neither know nor employ any of these terms in their worship and ritual practices. The fact that different deities with their own names and agents were believed to exist in different African communities, and no matter how rapacious such forces might be, they are not called Satan, demons or devils. Nevertheless, some of the mainline Churches have pastorally provided many means of disarming evil forces opposed to the development of Christian faith and the Gospel. Solemn exorcism and enriched sacraments and Sacramentals are being provided. What most African Christians do not seem to know is that it is risky to Christian faith and morals to swim in the troubled waters of the powers-in-between. The best pastoral counseling approach is to free the minds of the faithful from the allurements of those sorts of entities. It worries us when we hear priests tell members of their congregations that such entities are menacing them or that their Consecration and transubstantiations rites could not be effected because of the incantations and conjurations of occult worshippers around their churches. It is scandalous to many a faithful who wonder and quickly ask one another: where then is the power in the blood of Jesus? Where then is the *finger of God* with which Jesus acts? Why are we believers in Jesus? Is the Bible no longer true? To disabuse the minds of many such bewildered Christians, those who live by preaching the word should do well to anchor the faith of the faithful on the message of Paul in Col 2: 6 where he affirms that the primacy of Christ cancels the authority of all evil powers.²⁴³ It is when the faithful allow God's rule to permeate their entire human existence that the menace of demonic forces and their activities can be demolished and

prevented.²⁴⁴ Pursuit and inordinate acquisition of wealth and material prosperity must not be let to become mammon which the Christian gospel preaches against.²⁴⁵

Notes and References

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