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Salvation in a Crisis-Ridden World

An Intercultural Biblical Response



Salvation in a Crisis-Ridden World

Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible

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Introduction



Salvation – Crisis – Culture: Introducing the Volume

Beate Kowalski

In memory of Elisabeth Wilhelmine Maria Kowalski
Forever, our journey companion

First and foremost, the topic of the project is a decisive impulse of origin. The question of the causes of poverty, violence, and global crises – together with the challenges of cultural identities and religious plurality – has led to an interculturally sensitive, globally-oriented form of theology that is attentive to the social contexts of the global South. In this sense, intercultural theological reflection sees itself as an “interpreter” between different experiences and interpretations of “Salvation in a Crisis-Ridden World.” Furthermore, intercultural theology is also the usual work in mission, the translation of texts, and the challenges of a worldwide Christian community, which leads us to an intercultural theological reflection.

The articles in this volume deal with the various biblical concepts of salvation. What is one saved from? How does salvation work? Do we understand salvation as something present or a future event? What is the difference between consolation and redemption? How can theologians responsibly speak of salvation and proclaim the Saviour in a world shaken by crises? Questions upon questions that cry out for answers.

The project idea was born during the coronavirus pandemic. It is a cooperation between an OT scholar, Nicoletta Gatti in Ghana, an intercultural theologian, Franz Gmainer-Pranzl in Salzburg, and a NT scholar, Beate Kowalski in Dortmund. Three online conferences (11th-12th January 2023; 13th-14th July 2023; 4th-5th Jan 2024), each with up to 100 participants from all over the world, have taken place since then. Now that the manuscript is ready for printing, further global crises and wars have arisen. The topic is, therefore, more relevant than ever. Will theologians find an audience for their message?

The authors investigate challenges in our crisis-ridden world and the concept of salvation. They investigate global and national issues (violence and religious fundamentalism, peace efforts, reconciliation processes, migration, and the climate crisis). Scholars from different (academic) cultures ensure

a global perspective and work toward intercultural dialogical hermeneutics. They reflect on their interpretation process, the correlation between their cultural context, their chosen methodology, interpretation, and hermeneutics. All papers pay attention to contextual hermeneutical principles (dialogical hermeneutics, comparative hermeneutics, etc.), methods, and approaches that do justice to the Biblical text and the readers' context.

The volume is divided into three parts: The first part deals with fundamental concepts. Franz Gmainer-Pranzl gives insight into the research fields of intercultural theology. This is followed by the first main section with contributions from Old Testament exegesis. Key biblical texts from the Torah, the Nebiim and Ketubim are examined in terms of their concepts of salvation and the respective cultural background of the author. In the Torah section Alexander Salakpi deals with "Blood and Salvation: A Study of Two Traditions – Jewish and Eve," John Baptist Antony with "Survival and Wellbeing as Salvation: A Study in the Hagar Narratives in Genesis from Dalit Feminine Perspective," and Jobymon Skaria with "Meeting Between Divinity and Humanity as a Paradigm for Advancing Intercultural Dialogical Hermeneutics: An Intertextual Dialogue Between Abraham's Arbitration (Gen 18:22b-33) and Pottan Theyyam."

The prophetic theology is the subject of Luma A. Kudher OP, who investigates in "Curse and Salvation in David and Shimei Narrative (2 Sam–1 Kings)," and Emem Opoku-Agyemang, who presents "The House-Help System as Modern-Day Slavery: An Intercultural Reading of Isaiah 58:1–9 in the Context of Ghana." Finally, Kojo Okyere reflects on "Rethinking Sin and Salvation in Ghanaian Christianity: Contextualising Selected Prophetic Oracles on Salvation."

The OT section concludes with contributions on Wisdom theology: Nicoletta Gatti discusses the difficult issue of theodicy in her article "Suffering and Prosperity Preaching: Intercultural Reading of Job 22–27."

As can be seen from the contributions, the respective Bible texts are updated and read as responses to culture- or country-specific crises. This reading process is reflected upon critically and hermeneutically. Projections of one's own ideas (*eisegesis*) are avoided, as are fundamentalist and naïve readings, as they present a kind of 'bloodless' theology. The biblical text is taken seriously as the revealed word of God.

The second main section contains contributions from New Testament scholarship. Werner Kahl opens this second section with his contribution "The Relevance of Imagining and Experiencing Jesus as 'life-saviour' in West Africa: A Hermeneutical Reflection on the Use of *agyenkwa* as Rendition of Greek σωτήρ (*sōtēr*)?" Eight chapters on Gospel traditions and Luke-Acts follow these fundamental reflections on salvation in the West African culture. The series of contributions opens with Stanley Ekwugha's chapter, "NCHEGHARI: An

Intercultural Understanding of *μετάνοια* in Mark 1:15,” and proceeds with an interdisciplinary contribution by Barbara Crostini, the sole church historian among the conference speakers.

She presents “Luke 4 and the Reader Portrait in the Dura Synagogue (3rd century): Rejoicing in the Common Citizenship of the Planet.” Two further chapters engage with the Gospel of Luke: Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh examines the complex issue of miracles in “Salvific Nature of Miracles during Crisis. Socio-Rhetorical Examination of Luke 7:11–17,” while Abraham Opoku-Baffour focuses on “Love in a Segregated World: Luke 10:25–37 and Interfaith Dialogue.”

Three contributions on the Gospel of John are presented in this section. The first two address John 4 from distinct yet complementary angles. Augustine Agwulonu OP, writing from a Nigerian context, offers an intercultural biblical reading in “Water in the Well and Living Water in Samaria (John 4:1–26): A Model for an Intercultural-Biblical Response for Salvation in Crisis-Ridden Africa.” Madeline Stratmann, a German theologian, follows with “Successful Dialogue in Times of Crises and Conflicts?! Hermeneutical and Methodological Reflection of Intercultural Exegesis in the Light of John 4.” The third article on John’s Gospel by Amelia Dadoo correlates John 5:1–15 with the Ghanaian Christian Community.

The subchapter on the narrative traditions of the NT writings concludes with an essay by Marievonne Schöttner on “Paul’s Report on God and Resurrection in Acts 17:16–34: Model of a Religiously Responsible Speech in a Plural World.”

The next subchapter presents two articles on the Epistle tradition of the NT. George Ossom-Batsa reads Rom 8:18–23: “All Creation Groans in Pain: An Exegetical Reading of Rom 8:18–23” and Stefania De Vito responds to the abuse crisis with Col 2:6–16, which she interprets as a reconciliation process.

Rodolfo Felices Luna closes the volume with an interesting approach to Revelation. He reads it with an ecological hermeneutics. “How We Imagine Salvation Matters in Times of Ecological Crisis: An Ecocritical Appraisal of Revelation 21–22.”

Nearly all contemporary problems and crises are reflected upon using biblical texts. A wide range of contributions has been compiled, expressing the diversity of the exegetical and theological landscape, its interculturality and internationality. It is an attempt to understand exegesis not in a Eurocentric way, but with universal breadth. The global universality and significance of the Christian message are made clear.

The editorial team would like to thank all contributors and discussion partners during the three online conferences for their ideas and careful work. We are gratefully indebted to Sr. Mary Reis fsp, who proofread the manuscript with great care and within a very short time as a native speaker. We hope and wish

for a readership that recognises in the contributions a path to the future of theology, which is increasingly shaped by international and intercultural dialogue.

We dedicate this book to Elisabeth Wilhelmine Maria Kowalski (née Heise), Beate's beloved mother, who entered into the light of the resurrection during our second conference. She died in deep peace, upheld by her steadfast faith in the salvation and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Beate Kowalski

Dortmund/Germany

Reflections on Interculturality



Interculturality in a Crisis-Ridden World

Franz Gmainer-Pranzl

Introduction

The question of the causes of poverty, violence, and global crises – together with the challenges of cultural identities and religious plurality – has led to an interculturally sensitive, globally-oriented way of doing theology that is attentive to the cultural and social contexts. In this sense, intercultural theological reflection sees itself as an ‘interpreter’ between different experiences and interpretations of ‘Salvation in a Crisis-Ridden World’.

This programmatic text introduced the online conference “Salvation in a Crisis-Ridden World. An Intercultural Biblical Response” (2023/24),¹ and encapsulates what intercultural theology is all about: The concrete challenges facing human society on a local and global level require theological reflection to provide a response from the perspective of both content and methodology. Issues such as poverty, violence, migration and identity politics do not solely represent new theological *content*; they also demand a *fresh way of doing theology*.

The following reflections are intended chiefly to shed light on this new theological method and to demonstrate what it might mean to take responsibility for the Christian faith in a crisis-ridden world. Accordingly, I shall (1) propose fields of work and problem areas to be tackled by intercultural theology, (2) map out the interdisciplinary connections mediated by intercultural theology, and (3) highlight catholicity as a theological stance that can fulfil the role of interpreter between different cultures, religions and societies in a crisis-ridden world. As a systematic theological reflection, within the setting of an essentially biblical exegetical conference or publication, this article plays a unique role: it can engage with the learning processes of *inner*theological interdisciplinary relationships and may be able to help further the conversation between the disciplines of systematic theology and biblical scholarship – which, given the urgency of the theme of the conference, is surely of considerable importance.

¹ Cf. the conference folder: https://kth.ht.tu-dortmund.de/storages/kth-ht/r/news/2312_Salvation_in_a_Crisis-Ridden_World_-_Conference_III_Jan_2024_.pdf (28.01.2024).

1. **Intercultural Theology: A Response to Challenges of the Modern World**

In the 1980s, the German-speaking world began to consider the introduction of a new theological subject that would examine cultural and religious pluralism in different societies. Around the turn of the century, some (mainly Protestant) theological faculties in Germany and Austria set up chairs of “Intercultural Theology;” at the same time, some faculties and institutes replaced the designation “Mission Studies” with “Intercultural Theology,” or added intercultural theology as an additional emphasis within already existing fields of work. Following an initial innovative and creative phase, the question arose as to the precise content and methodology of intercultural theology and its relationship with other theological subject areas, and indeed with religious research as a whole. In 2013, a dedicated conference² tackled the issue of how intercultural theology perceived itself; the presentations were published in the journal “Intercultural Theology.”³ This conference offered the opportunity to discuss and develop different approaches and models of intercultural theological thinking; my own suggestion regarding the way in which the content of intercultural theology should be structured gave rise to the idea that the new subject should consist of four fields of work which would be interconnected and often overlap, but which would ultimately have different emphases.

This model is based on two fundamental and incontrovertible assumptions of current theology: (1) within Christianity there is a wide range of cultural lifestyles and traditions; (2) outside of Christianity there is a wide diversity of religions. If both of these challenges are viewed in the context of (a) actual encounters and comparisons as well as (b) terminological and methodological clarification, we can identify four spheres of intercultural theological work:

	cultural pluralism within Christianity	religious pluralism outside of Christianity
levels of practical experience and comparison	(1a) <i>contextual theology</i>	(2a) <i>comparative theology</i>
terminological clarification	(1b) <i>intercultural theological epistemology</i>	(2b) <i>theology of religions</i>

2 Annual Conference of the German Society for Missiology at the Protestant Academy Hofgeismar (Germany): “Intercultural Theology. Current trends in an academic discipline” (26–28 September 2013).

3 Cf. Intercultural Theology. Journal of Mission Studies 40 (2014), Volume 2–3 on the theme “What is Intercultural Theology?.”

Of course, this differentiation does not mean that there can be no terminological clarification at the level of practical comparison, or that intra-Christian cultural pluralism can be wholly isolated from extra-Christian religious pluralism. Here we are drawing a distinction between different emphases, whilst not artificially separating fields that are linked by the practical problems they pose (for instance as regards the question of what the challenges of a crisis-ridden world mean for theology).

- *Contextual theology* explores the different cultural and social contexts of what is Christian, as well as the reciprocal influences between the Christian faith and the cultural/social life worlds. Several themes covered by contextual theology might be: theology in Japan,⁴ theology in Central Africa, feminist theology, liberation theology, etc. In essence, all theological statements, and indeed all biblical texts and dogmatic formulations, are contextual since they make use of the terminology of a particular time and social milieu. Contextualisation, however, also implies translation: the attempt to transmit a message into a different cultural setting.
- *Intercultural theological epistemology* explores the meaning of terms that are taken for granted by many frames of reference (e.g. mission, context, culture, religion, etc.), and examines models for the contextualisation of the Christian message.⁵ It is evident that the automatic adoption of terminology, models and concepts constantly gives rise to misunderstandings and misinterpretations when a single term (e.g. “inculturation” or “religious liberty”) is understood in different ways. Instead of accusing each other of “heresy” or “fundamentalism,” as currently happens time and again in a mis-siological context, it would be better to engage seriously with the issues of theological epistemology.
- *Comparative theology* compares the elements, rituals, texts and symbols of different religious traditions – in accordance with the principles of interreligious hermeneutics⁶ – so that the encounter with other religious traditions

4 Here I would deliberately not allude to “Japanese theology,” because this essentialist way of speaking suggests that in a specific area there is a homogeneous form of church and theology. It is better to refer to “theology in Japan,” allowing room for internal diversity.

5 Cf. for example Bevans 1992, 30–110: *Translation Model, Anthropological Model, Praxis Model, Synthetic Model, Transcendental Model*.

6 These principles stipulate, for example, that the comparison should not be undertaken by simple association, but that the position and role of an element in the given religion should be scrutinised. Thus, for example, a comparison of the Bible with the Koran does not reflect the self-understanding of Christianity and Islam respectively, since the Bible is considered to be the witness to the word of God, whereas the Koran is considered to be the revealed “word of God.” In Christian terms, it is the person of Jesus Christ that corresponds to Islam’s

leads to a better understanding of one's own faith. Those who work in the field of comparative theology stress the importance of taking interreligious comparisons to a micro-level: for instance, they compare the practice of fasting adopted by Buddhist and Christian monks respectively; or they consider the forms of prayer used by Islam alongside those of traditional African religions, doing so within manageable parameters, rather than at a broad level.

- The *theology of religions* asks the key question: What does it signify that adherents of another religion do not share my own conceptions of “salvation” and “truth”, and vice versa. Are people saved in spite of their “error,” or does another religion offer a way of salvation? The 20th-century Anglo-American debate, to which the British philosopher of religion, John Hick, made a major contribution, gave rise to the now familiar classification model with its four categories: (1) atheism (salvation and truth in *no* religion); (2) exclusivism (salvation and truth *only in one* religion); (3) inclusivism (salvation and truth *in principle in one* religion, but also to some extent in other religions); and (4) pluralism (salvation and truth *in more than one* religion). This model prevents one from side-stepping the issue of the salvation and truth “of others” by means of courteous clichés, but instead compels one to adopt a theological position on the grounds that religions consider themselves to be ways of salvation and not merely ethical or cultural concepts.

What is at stake for these subjects and work areas is not intellectual trends or issues that have been evolved purely for the purposes of intercultural theology, but rather a set of unavoidable challenges now confronting theology and the Church. For the 21st-century Church, the cultural diversity within Christianity (already demonstrated, in fact, within the biblical canon), together with the religious pluralism that can call Christianity and its self-understanding into question, is a given which represents both enrichment and the potential for social conflict. Anyone who takes seriously both the Christian faith and contemporary society must necessarily take a firm position with regard to these conditions of life and faith. This theological activity may go by the name “Intercultural Theology” or some other label, there may be a separate department within the canon of theological disciplines, or the subject matter may be integrated into already existing sections of the curriculum. All this is of lesser importance than a clear theological effort to take responsibility for addressing these challenges, especially now in the present crisis-ridden world.

understanding of the Koran; therefore, a superficial comparison between “two books” is too simplistic.

2. Interdisciplinarity as Characteristic of Doing Intercultural Theology

The interdisciplinary approach adopted by intercultural theology is one of its chief distinguishing features. Contrary to some misapprehensions – that interdisciplinarity implies in some way a “mixing” of different academic disciplines or that theology is enlisting other academic sectors as “supporting disciplines” – “interdisciplinarity” means first and foremost a reciprocal learning process. No one academic discipline can know everything or offer a comprehensive perspective of a problematic situation, and there is sometimes a risk that subsectors of academic scholarship may become isolated or come to regard themselves as an absolute authority. An external perspective and a fresh approach and methodology are then required in order to gain a better understanding of particular aspects of a problem. For example, if Christian theology laments the situation of climate change and calls for sustainable action, it is well advised to enter into dialogue with meteorology, ecology and the life sciences, so that not merely the formulation of an appeal is offered, but also empirical reference to concrete issues. Theology does not forfeit its authority when it adopts an interdisciplinary approach, nor is it substituting the expertise of other sciences for its own. Rather, it wants to learn from others and appreciate other viewpoints on a given subject. The German education scientist Sebastian Lerch understands interdisciplinarity in this sense as the “collaboration between different disciplines in order to solve a common problem”⁷.

A perspective that takes the view that theology alone can provide answers to every question relating to culture, society and science is referred to as “integralism” (inasmuch as it believes it has “integrated” every form of knowledge into its own sphere). The Second Vatican Council criticised this epistemological narcissism and spoke in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* – in a somewhat circuitous formulation – of the “rightful autonomy of earthly affairs” (GS 36).⁸ This autonomy is not just required of the current world; it corresponds to the creation order:

[...] By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. These, as the methods proper to every science and technique, must be respected. Consequently, methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with the faith,

⁷ Lerch 2017, 54.

⁸ Conciliar documents are quoted from Flannery (ed.) 2014.

because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God (GS 36).

Thus, intercultural theology has taken on board what applies to theology as a whole: it respects the autonomy of the cultural, social, political, scientific, and other dimensions of life, and engages in interdisciplinary exchange with multiple academic sectors, especially with cultural and religious studies, the political and social sciences, Area Studies (e.g. African Studies) and (intercultural) philosophy. It is not sufficient to advocate “inculturation,” to welcome (or repudiate) “globalisation” or to criticise “development;” it is essential to enter into dialogue with the relevant specialist disciplines. Let us consider a few examples:

- The term “*culture*” is undoubtedly central to intercultural theological analysis. The theology of mission repeatedly confronts the question regarding the extent to which the proclamation of the faith may “accommodate” a culture, while the theology of religion asks whether “religion” is not in fact a part of “culture.” What actually is “culture”? To use the cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz’s typology – is the concept of culture held by intercultural theology normative and holistic viewed in terms of differentiation theory, or is it meaning- and knowledge-oriented?⁹ In other words, does it assume that “culture” is a desirable way of life (normative), that it shapes the totality of a collective, that it is related to specific intellectual and artistic activities (differentiation-theoretical), or that it is to be understood as a complex of symbolic systems¹⁰ (meaning- and knowledge-oriented). Its understanding of “culture” depends on which of the above concepts forms the basis of its thinking. Both philosophy and theology speak of a “crisis of culture,” yet what is understood by this can vary widely. Intercultural theology is well-advised to engage in interdisciplinary exchange in this regard so as to learn what “culture” may mean and which concept of culture underlies a particular theological argument.¹¹

9 Cf. Reckwitz 2008, 64–90.

10 This understanding of “culture” includes the well-known thesis promulgated by the US American ethnologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) that culture was to be understood as “a net of meanings,” as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [and women, F.G.-P.] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973, 89).

11 The Second Vatican Council had already used various different ideas of “culture” in a separate chapter (“Proper development of culture”) in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* 53–62: “[...] The word ‘culture’ in the general sense refers to all those things which go

- The meaning of “*interculturality*” appears obvious – but even here there are different approaches and perspectives. (1) *Multiculturalism* describes the factual multiplicity of culturally determined groups within a city or a country; “multiculturalism” is often censured, or vilified, as “multiculti” by groups on the political right – but both critics and defenders of the multicultural miss the point of the meaning of this term. “Multiculturalism” is not a political strategy, but a fact resulting from the processes of migration and globalisation.¹² It is not the image of a given society comprising “many cultures” that is to be censured; rather, what is critically assessed is the image of a situation where these “cultures” exist alongside each other as isolated groups with fixed identities. (2) On the contrary, *interculturality* means not the mere side-by-side existence of individual cultures, but the reciprocal processes of learning from each other and influencing each other. The criticism that “interculturality” presupposes that cultures should be viewed as self-contained realities that only relate to each other retrospectively, colliding with each other like “balls,” only applies if a holistic concept of culture is assumed. However, if cultures are perceived against the background of a meaning- and knowledge-oriented model, then “interculturality” can be understood as an incomplete experience of irritation, growth and a changed view of one’s own identity. (3) Ultimately, *transculturation* expresses the idea that interculturality can lead to the emergence of fresh cultural and social realities that take on board elements and characteristics of different cultural traditions, eventually generating something new and unique. Here the term “hybridity” becomes appropriate since it makes it clear that the supposedly fixed boundaries between “cultures” are actually open and variable.¹³ Thus, it is not sufficient for theology to enthuse about “interculturality” (which, incidentally, finds its origins and content as far back as biblical texts). In addition, there needs to be interdisciplinary exchange with the cultural and social sciences and with (intercultural-)philosophical theories so as to be able to portray a responsibly intellectual image of “interculturality.”

to the refining and developing of humanity’s diverse mental and physical endowments. We strive to subdue the earth by our knowledge and labour; we humanise social life both in the family and in the whole civic community through the improvement of customs and institutions; we express through our works the great spiritual experiences and aspirations of humanity through the ages; we communicate and preserve them to be an inspiration for the progress of many people, even of all humanity” (GS 53).

12 Cf. Bhargava 2012.

13 “While hybridity may be ordinary and unremarkable in itself, the critical contribution of hybridity as a theme is that it questions boundaries that are taken for granted” (Pieterse 2012, 126).

- Similarly, there is a need for a viable theory of “*globalisation*,” which is defended by some, fiercely criticised by others, and for the most part misunderstood by both. Several decades ago the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1944–2015) drew a distinction¹⁴ between (1) *globalisation* as the processes that bring about the loss of national demarcation and sovereignty, (2) *globality* as an ideology that aims to replace political activity by the “laws of the market” (while concealing the fact that these “laws of the market” are not natural laws, but the result of political strategies), and (3) *globality* as life in a world society which no longer contains any self-contained groups or countries. Whilst the “first modernity” was characterised by internationality, i.e. cooperation between different nation-states, “globality” means a “second modernity,” that is to say the irreversible situation of global connectedness for good or ill. The 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 Covid pandemic are examples of the phenomena of the “second modernity,” in this type of situation, nation-state boundaries are no longer of any significance. Therefore, when intercultural theology takes up a position on “globalisation,” or the universal Catholic Church describes itself as a “global player,” we need to ask what is meant by this. Here the critique of “cultural centrisms,” as formulated by the Austrian philosopher Franz Martin (*1942), could play a part in reflecting on one’s own understanding of the “global.”¹⁵ An (1) *expansive centrism* that seeks to extend its own conviction to everyone else, and an (2) *integrative centrism* that waits for everyone else to recognise the superiority of a cultural tradition or society model and to adopt it, are both different from a (3) *separative or multiple centrism* that views every tradition as its own centre and – often in postcolonial criticism – rejects every centre from without. This third form of centrism can be described as relativism, that is, rejection of the possibility of learning from each other or insisting on transcultural standards (such as human rights). In contrast, (4) *tentative or transitory centrism* adheres to the conviction that different cultures and societies can agree on a “centre,” but that this requires a “polylogue” – an open and self-critical process of argument and communication: “In a tentative understanding of being ‘centres,’ there will be persistence and openness, acceptance of arguments, and criticism of others.”¹⁶ Which version of “globalisation” or “centrism” does intercultural theology support? This important enquiry into the self-understanding of theological thinking results from the interdisciplinary debate surrounding concepts and models

14 Cf. Beck 1997, 24–36.

15 Cf. Wimmer 2011, 43–7.

16 Wimmer 2011, 47.

of the global, which will generate conceptions that can vary widely from each other; nevertheless, these ought not to be adopted inadvertently by (intercultural) theology, but should be critically justified.

- Another term that appears frequently in this context is “*development*.” Theology often blindly assumes the significance of the term “development” and the designation of “(under)developed” countries without considering that this concept has a long Eurocentric prehistory (with Europe leading the way as the front-runner of world history), and that in the 20th century especially, against the backdrop of the cold war, the emphasis was that the “poor countries of the south” were to receive “development aid” so they would not fall under the influence of the Soviet Union. This was certainly the position taken by the then US President Harry Truman (1884–1972, President 1945–1953). A number of theories of “development” were generated, some highly contradictory: development meant helping underdeveloped countries to catch up with the industrialised countries (*modernisation theory*); development concealed the fact that “underdevelopment” constituted the permanent prerequisite for the wealth of the global North and could not be structurally overcome (*dependency theory*); in a world that for centuries had been characterised by capitalist systems and was divided into cores, semi-peripheries and peripheries, development could not in fact bring about change – unless the prevailing world system were to be radically reshaped (*world system theory*); development was ultimately paternalism and must be replaced by power-critical and emancipatory politics (*postcolonial theories*); development was not necessary at all, on the grounds that any state that wanted to could work its way upwards by its own efforts (*neo-liberalism*); or development was in fact an ideological construct that could be replaced by the term “social transformation” (*post-development theory*). Traditionally, intercultural theology has aligned itself with modernisation theory and, in its liberation theology orientation, has presupposed dependency theory. But what about today? Which model of “development” is currently typical of ecclesiastical and theological thinking? Here too, a critical and nuanced exchange with the globalisation and development theories¹⁷ is required in order that intercultural theology not simply focus on a “just world” or call for “development,” but that it be a meaningful concept with which the Christian faith can be justified in a crisis-ridden world.

¹⁷ Cf. the excellent presentation of different development theories in Fischer, Hauck and Boatcă (eds.) 2016.

3. Catholicity: The Social and Intellectual Horizon of Intercultural Theology

Here “catholicity” is not the denominational identifier of a specific Church, but a key feature of the Christian faith as such. “Catholic” – from the Greek καθόλου (= concerning the whole) – in its original sense means an attitude or objective that has not just *one* aspect or *one* dimension of life in mind, but life in its totality. In the context of the Christian faith, “catholicity” denotes: whatever the gospel message has to say about the entirety of human cultures and societies and the full reality of human life and experience. In this sense, therefore, it would not correspond to a catholic view in this sense to exclude certain cultures or dimensions of human life from the scope of valid faith, as may crop up in a racist or sexist understanding of faith and the church.

Precisely in a crisis-ridden world, marked as it is by divisions and conflicts, the work of intercultural theology in *every* Christian church (insofar as that church is willing) needs just such a “catholic” stance, one that is not merely pursuing its own interests. Such a church will not be trying merely to survive as best it can, but will take account of the whole world and of humanity in its entirety, as set out in the preface to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*:

The world which the council has in mind is the world of women and men, the entire human family seen in its total environment. It is the world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures. ...

It is the human person that is to be saved, human society which must be renewed. It is the human person, therefore, which is the key to this discussion, each individual human person in her or his totality, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will. This is the reason why this holy synod, in proclaiming humanity’s noble destiny and affirming that there exists in it a divine seed, offers the human race the sincere cooperation of the church in fostering a sense of sisterhood and brotherhood to correspond to their destiny ... (GS 2–3).

This catholic stance, which does not connect only with those realms of reality that it finds fitting or pleasant, but exposes itself to the whole of reality – even when the latter is challenging and painful – is what distinguishes the social structure of the church and the intellectual horizon of intercultural theology. A crisis-ridden world needs theological reflection that covers as many people and circumstances as possible and that can readily interpret between different life contexts without excluding any human experience. In the 21st century, this

kind of theology, one that refrains from advancing a single-interest position, but supports the message of life across different languages and constantly reinterprets itself, is going to be more vital than ever before – whether or not it is called “Intercultural Theology.”

Translation into English: Sophie Allen (Salzburg)

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Blood and Salvation: A Study of Two Traditions – Jewish and Eve

Alexander Salakpi

Introduction

The same blood binds together a group of people ‘from one womb’ who share a worldview that revolves around basic assumptions by which they organise their lives. These cultural assumptions form the basis on which members are raised within a culture and are conditioned to live the reality of their lives in that regard. Culture contains expectations regarding the wholeness of life or well-being for its members, which is equated to salvation. In many indigenous cosmologies, blood is not only a biological necessity but also a theological and symbolic medium through which kinship, identity, and spiritual belonging are affirmed. It may serve as a marker of shared ancestry and covenantal ties, contributing to a collective sense of wholeness within the community.

This study investigates the theological and cultural significance of blood and salvation in both Judaism and Eve tradition,¹ with particular attention to how these frameworks inform Christian faith among the Eve. As some Eve identify as Christians, and Christianity itself emerged from Judaism, exploring these two traditions offers valuable insight into how indigenous understandings of blood can enrich Christian theological reflection. Within Eve cosmology, blood is intimately linked to human salvation, embedded in beliefs, norms, and values that shape communal life and spiritual identity. Recognising the efficacy of blood within their own cultural framework may enable Eve Christians to engage more deeply with the salvific meaning of Jesus’ blood, shed for the redemption of humankind. To facilitate this engagement, the study draws on Judaism – the theological root of Christianity – which likewise possesses a rich tradition of blood as a medium of covenant, purification, and human

1 Although commonly rendered as ‘Ewe’ in much of the literature, the accurate orthography is ‘Eve.’ This paper specifically refers to the Anlo (Anlo) Eve of Ghana, who inhabit south-eastern Ghana as well as parts of southern Togo and Benin. Cf. Asamoah 1986, 1; Dotse 2011, 4; Venkatachalam 2012.

wholeness. This comparative approach helps illuminate the theological resonance of Jesus' saving blood within both ancestral and biblical paradigms.

This paper, through biblical analysis and historical-intercultural perspectives, examines the efficacy of blood as a saving agent. It highlights the unique and once-for-all salvific essence of Jesus' blood by engaging in an intercultural study of the Eve and Jewish traditions. The aim is to unveil and deepen the theological understanding of Jesus' blood through the lens of Eve cultural knowledge and ritual practice. The study draws significantly on fieldwork conducted among Eve traditionalists to explore the profound significance of blood rituals within their cosmology.

1. Concepts of Blood and Salvation

1.1 Concept of Blood

Across religious traditions, blood is widely regarded as sacred because it signifies life and mediates salvation (cf. Exod 12).² Its intrinsic link to vitality renders it a potent symbol and medium for atonement, often employed in rituals of expiation to reconcile the worshipper with the divine. In sacrificial contexts, the deity symbolically receives the life-force through the offering of blood, while the worshipper partakes of the meat of the sacrificed animal – a gesture that affirms communality and facilitates communication between the divine and human realms. Through this ritual exchange, the worshipper receives forgiveness of sins or, in the case of thanksgiving offerings, an abundance of life and continued fellowship with God.

1.1.1 Jewish

In the Tanak, blood is offered in sacrificial contexts for various purposes, most notably for the atonement of sin. On Yom Kippur, for instance, blood is presented to God to expiate the sins of Israel (cf. Lev 16). In such rituals, an animal is sacrificed and its blood – representing the life of the victim – is symbolically offered to God. The altar functions as the locus of divine reception, where the blood is sprinkled on and around its surface as a sacred gesture of reconciliation (cf. Lev 1:5). In other instances, the meat of the sacrificed animal is

2 The Eve abhor the shedding of human blood and punish anyone who voluntarily sheds human blood; likewise in the Bible, the shedding of innocent human blood comes with consequences (cf. Gen 4:15; 9:5–6; Exod 20:13; Deut 19:6–13; Num 35:9–34).

consumed outside the sanctuary, while the blood is poured onto the ground, underscoring the prohibition against ingesting blood and its sacred association with life (cf. Deut 12:23–25). These ritual acts affirm the theological conviction that blood mediates life, restores communion with the divine, and sustains covenantal relationship.

1.1.2 Eve

Most African cultures, including the Eve, believe that blood has *something* to do with the seat of life, the heart.³ Since it is from the heart that blood runs through the body, it becomes the source of life and holds life. The interaction between the heart and the blood suggests that the soul is embedded in the blood, making it sacred.⁴ Its significance in sacrifice derives from the fact that blood possesses a vital life force. Animal blood sacrifice is an essential source by which an Eve achieves life, health, happiness, and prosperity.⁵

The shedding of human blood – whether intentional or accidental – incurs the wrath of the land, which must be ritually pacified. This is because the gods are believed to embody life itself and serve as the mysterious source from which all life flows. The violation of life may provoke spiritual retaliation, often interpreted as the dead demanding appeasement through acts of vengeance or ritual redress. In the event of an accident involving bloodshed, specific rites must be performed to avert misfortune and restore balance among the living. If such rituals are neglected, it is believed that the spirit of the deceased lingers restlessly, increasing the likelihood of further accidents or calamities occurring at the same location.⁶

During the annual festival celebration involving all the people of the land, a sacrifice is offered as a propitiation for the sins of the people, reminiscent of the ritual of atonement.⁷

3 Nabofa 1985, 390.

4 Nabofa 1985, 390; Akintan 2013, 1039.

5 This dynamic is reflected in the numerous sacrifices and rituals performed at key stages of life, all oriented toward securing life and well-being. Events perceived as disruptions to the natural order or threats to life are interpreted through a ritual lens and addressed through sacrificial means.

6 Bredenbröker 2024, 51.

7 Ahoritor, Gatti and Salakpi 2024, 154–63. Historically, human sacrifice is reported to have occurred; in contemporary contexts, if such practices persist, they are believed to be conducted in secrecy.

1.2 The Concept of Salvation

According to Spicq and Grelot, salvation is to save someone from the danger of perishing that one risks; the act of being saved from that danger manifests itself in protection, liberation, health, victory, peace, and the like.⁸

1.2.1 Jewish

The Hebrew root *ysh* and its derivatives signify space, freedom, security, wholeness (cf. 1 Sam 23:2, 5; Jer 42:11). In this light, safety, deliverance and victory tend to define salvation. Yahweh is noted as the one who saves (cf. Hos 13:4; 1 Macc 4:11),⁹ and who, at the same time, empowers saviours to rescue those in need (cf. Judg 2:16). In this regard, the blood of the animal received by God pleads for the salvation of the one who offers it.

In the New Testament, the Greek terms *σῶζειν* (to save), *σωτήρ* (saviour), and *σωτηρία* (salvation) carry profound theological significance. Notably, the title *σωτήρ* was widely used in Greco-Roman literature to refer to deities such as Zeus, Heracles, Serapis, Isis, and Asklepios.¹⁰ Following the conquests of Alexander the Great, Hellenistic rulers adopted the title from around 312 BCE, and it was later conferred upon Roman emperors as part of the imperial cult.¹¹ Due to these associations with mystery religions and the deification of political figures, the term appears infrequently in the Synoptic Gospels and Pauline epistles, but gains prominence in the Catholic epistles.¹² Within Christian theology, however, *σωτήρ* is ultimately redefined and applied to Jesus Christ as the true Saviour who accomplishes the redemption of humankind through his sacrificial death. This reappropriation of the term underscores the theological claim that Jesus, as the Lamb of God, embodies Yahweh's salvific initiative – extending grace and restoration even to those considered most hopeless.¹³

⁸ Spicq and Grelot 1997, 519.

⁹ During the siege of Jerusalem in 2 Kgs 18:28–35, the king of Assyria dared Yahweh to save Israel; and Yahweh, through Isaiah, promised his people salvation (cf. 2 Kgs 19:34; 20:6); and he indeed saved his people.

¹⁰ McKenzie 1995, 761.

¹¹ McKenzie 1995, 761.

¹² See McKenzie 1995, 762.

¹³ There were numerous times in the history of the Israelites that God intervened on their behalf and achieved salvation for them. For example, the liberation of Israel from Egypt, their journey through the desert to the Promised Land in Canaan (cf. Deut 6:20–25) and their liberation from Exile in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

1.2.2 Eve

In his article “Man’s Salvation: Its Nature and Meaning in African Traditional Religion,” Gaba translates the Eve concept of salvation as *ɔagbe*, a term imbued with ritual significance and expressive of a prayerful longing for human flourishing.¹⁴ This notion of well-being resonates with Idowu’s interpretation of the Hebrew *שְׁלוֹם*, where salvation is understood holistically, encompassing body, mind, and soul. In both African Traditional Religion and Eve cosmology, *שְׁלוֹם* or *ɔagbe* represents the ultimate goal of life. Though *ɔagbe* originates from God, it is mediated through the gods and ancestral spirits.¹⁵ Upon receiving the offering, Mawu bestows salvation in the form of blessings, which are again channelled through these spiritual intermediaries, affirming the communal and relational nature of divine-human interaction.

In the worldview of the Eve, *ɔagbe* offers total liberation in both sacred and secular life.¹⁶ The ancestors serve as guides towards and guardians of salvation because they were once human. The beliefs, values and norms of the people emerged with the ancestors and have become the wisdom by which to live and must become customary for the people.¹⁷ To enjoy *ɔagbe*, the Eve are expected to live a patterned code of life.¹⁸

According to Asante, the African understanding of salvation encompasses “getting answers to problems of life and overcoming the agents of evil and the hard realities of life.”¹⁹ Within Eve cosmology, evil is perceived as a pervasive problem. Events or conditions that defy comprehension are often attributed to the influence of evil and are believed to require ritual or spiritual remedy. The Eve ideal of salvation includes expectations of physical health, prosperity, social recognition, and overall well-being. Even when personal choices contribute to stagnation or misfortune, evil is frequently invoked as the underlying cause, reflecting a worldview in which spiritual forces are deeply intertwined with human experience and moral accountability.

14 Gaba 1978, 389.

15 Gaba 1978, 390.

16 The Eve conceive of the human person as an integrated whole, body and spirit, constituting a life-giving entity. Upon death, this life is not extinguished but continues in communion with the ancestors, affirming the enduring bond between the living and the departed. See Adedeji 2012, 54.

17 Bujo 1992, 27.

18 The Eve patterned code of life is not different from what is written in Shabangu 2005, 201.

19 Asante 2001, 361.

2. The Efficacy of Blood in Salvation

In sacrificial theology, the blood of the victim mediates salvation, functioning as an essential element because it embodies life itself.²⁰

2.1 The Jewish Tradition

2.1.1 The Sacredness of Blood

In Israel, blood is life (cf. Lev 17:11, 14); God gives life and so anything that has to do with blood has to do with God. Human beings created in the image of God are sacred and anyone who destroys life must be destroyed. Blood vengeance is legitimised in Gen 9:5–6. To prevent bloodshed among human beings, God made a law “thou shall not kill” (cf. Exod 20:13). Moreover, God punished the shedding of innocent blood (cf. Judg 9:23–57) and promised his vengeance (cf. Ezek 24:3–14). In the Passover rite, the blood of the lamb was smeared on the lintels and the doorposts (cf. Exod 12:7, 22), thus becoming a source of salvation that preserved life (cf. Exod 12:13, 23). The blood of the animal consecrated a priest (cf. Exod 29:19–21) and the altar of sacrifice (cf. Ezek 43:18–27), and thus, marked the priest as belonging to God.

2.1.2 The Essence of Blood in Covenant Agreements

In biblical tradition, covenants were sealed with blood, symbolising the life-binding nature of the agreement. The slain animal represented the consequence of covenantal breach: Israel was to obey Yahweh, who in turn promised protection, provision, and salvation (cf. Prov 28:18). In covenantal rites, half the blood was sprinkled on the altar and half on the people, signifying shared life and mutual obligation (cf. Exod 24:3–8; Heb 9:16–21). Annual atonement rituals reinforced this bond, as the high priest entered the Holy of Holies with sacrificial blood to intercede for the sins of the people (cf. Lev 16; 17:11).

2.2 The Eve Tradition

It is the African belief that the blood of an animal contains life with embedded power, which enhances its potency in rituals of all kinds.²¹ The Eve value blood, and so perform a variety of rituals with animal blood.

²⁰ Nabofa 1985, 390.

²¹ Mbiti 1969, 205.

2.2.1 The Sacredness of Blood

The Eve hold norms that derive from the belief that blood is sacred. In turn, these norms enforce the sacredness of blood. Spilling blood is sacrilegious because of the mysterious force perceived in it, most especially in human blood. The Eve believe that rituals involving blood are symbolic because the power of the blood does not deal directly with the body of the person but with the soul. That is, they believe that guilt is taken away after offering the sacrifice of atonement. In the case of a dead person, it is believed that the offering of the sacrifice will enable the dead person's soul to rest peacefully.²² This ritual also inspires the living to live without fear.

2.2.2 Blood as Agent of Expiation

Blood, with its nuances, was used in reconciliation. A person who committed a deed punishable by death was instead required to buy a goat. The goat, replacing the person, was then bathed in a ritual bath and used to rub around the guilty party, was prayed over, then killed. It is believed that the life force of the goat, its blood, will enable God to hear the prayer and restore the penitent to wholeness. In the case of murder, if the person was being haunted by his or her victim, the animal was split in two and placed at the crossroads with other sacrificial items.²³ It looks filthy to the eye and, when rotten, smells; the more people scorn or avoid its sight, the more the evil committed is thought to be driven away from the person being haunted. In cases of adultery, when the gods seek to kill the person, the victim undergoes a night of prayers by a priest, after which a lamb, a fowl, a duck, beans and corn are mixed in a sacrifice to plead with the gods.²⁴

During the annual festival,²⁵ rituals are performed for purification, which may involve the washing of ancestral stools²⁶ and acts of reconciliation to seek

22 Bredenbröker 2024, 50–1.

23 Morris 2023, 342; Solanki, 2017, 362–3.

24 Anthony Nyonyo from Tsiamé, Ghana, interview granted the researcher on 30 March 2023.

25 Among the Eve, this annual communal ritual serves as a cleansing of evil and a restoration of harmony. It bears structural and symbolic resemblance to the Jewish observance of *Yōm Kippūr*, functioning as a culturally embedded expression of atonement and renewal. See Ahortor, Gatti and Salakpi 2024, 154–63.

26 A stool is crafted in honour of a person who has attained the status of Ancestor within the community. Though physically resembling a regular stool, it is typically smaller in size and housed in a specially designated building. This sacred space becomes a site of ritual engagement, where prayers of thanksgiving and petitions are offered. All members of the respective clan (*hlo*) are obliged to pay reverence to the stool, which serves as a

blessings for the year.²⁷ In this case, the blood of a goat or a cock is used for cleansing. The head of the animal is either placed on the altar, at the riverside or at a crossroad, while the rest of the meat is eaten by the people to show their communal life with their ancestors and their gods.²⁸ This ritual is performed at the beginning of the festival to atone for and to ward off evil so the celebration might be fruitful. For reconciliation between two people, a ram is killed, its blood is smeared on them, and the meat is eaten by all present. Both the communal and the interpersonal rituals are indispensable in the life and the thought of the Eve.²⁹

2.2.3 The Consecratory Value of Blood

Traditional priests hold the belief that the vital force inherent in blood is what renders it sanctified. The type of animal used in sacrificial rites varies according to the gravity of the ritual, ranging from fowl and pigeons to goats, sheep, cows, and, in extreme cases, human beings. Human blood is regarded as the most potent and efficacious, reserved for the sacrifices.³⁰ As previously noted, blood is believed to possess intrinsic value capable of expiating sin.³¹ Field investigations reveal that, due to the perceived high value of human blood, traditional priests, medicine men, and chiefs typically prohibit their wives from cooking for them during menstruation – an exception being some Christian chiefs. Menstrual blood is considered to surpass animal blood in ritual potency and is believed to nullify covenantal agreements with the deity if introduced during sacred observances.³² This practice reflects a widely held belief in many African contexts that menstrual blood renders women ritually unclean, thereby excluding them from specific activities such as ritual participation and food preparation for religious and political authorities, and at times even for their own husbands.

tangible symbol of ancestral presence and authority. Multiple stools may be found within a single room, each commemorating a distinguished clan member. Oversight of the stools is entrusted to a designated custodian known as the Stool Father (*Zikpito*), who, together with the Chief, serves as guardian of these ancestral emblems. See Salakpi 2022, 120.

²⁷ For a similar example, see Akintan 2013, 1039.

²⁸ Akintan 2013, 1040.

²⁹ Gaba 1978, 392.

³⁰ Such sacrifices were made, for example, for the stool. A mother who allowed her son to be sacrificed, obtained the succession of the stool for the siblings of her son, thus ensuring that they would continue to be installed as chiefs for the clan.

³¹ Akintan 2013, 1040; Nabofa 1995, 396.

³² John Segbe, a teacher at Adidome but a native of Tsiamé, Ghana, interview granted the researcher on 12 April 2023.

Blood features strongly in the human healing process. An encounter with a traditional priest revealed how he uses herbs and blood to heal illness. The herbs, he said, must be replaced annually to retain their potency. The replacement is done during the annual celebration in honour of the god amidst praying, dancing, singing, eating, and drinking. The person designated does that at the blind side of the participants. The replacement of the herb is the main reason for the celebration. It is also said that blood is used to reinforce charms, sorcery and medicines; as their potency diminishes, they are fortified with the blood of a ram.³³ According to Nabofa, the potency of a charm depends on the kind of animal used to acquire it. Animals such as pigeons, doves, cats, black cocks, white goats and rams are used.³⁴

The essence of blood in covenant agreements is manifold. Drinking blood is a phenomenon of a covenant relationship that inspires and strengthens relationships. This happens in religious rites in which sacrificial blood may be drunk.³⁵ Sometimes, worshippers are smeared with blood.³⁶ They believe they will receive spiritual powers through this and are in communion with the deity who will execute mystical performances. The drinking of fellow human blood also features among human beings. It is common among those with passionate love to engage themselves in an oath that demands the drinking of each other's blood in love and fidelity. This consent, commonly found among lovers who intend to live until death do them part, can be "sanctified" only by the two parties. Such covenants also exist among political parties, interest groups and, in the past, between nations or ethnic groups.³⁷

3. Efficacy of the Blood of Jesus in Salvation

This short overview shows the importance of blood in human salvation within these two traditions. Against the Jewish background, the Gospel according to Matthew emphasises the preciousness of human blood, which is clearly stated in the following instances: Jerusalem will be held accountable for the innocent blood shed from Abel to the last prophet, Zechariah (cf. 23:36); Judas knows he betrayed innocent blood after the fact (cf. 27:4); Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' blood while the mob took responsibility for it (cf. 27:24–25). The value

33 Dopamu 1977, 184.

34 Nabofa 2013, 401.

35 Shabangu 2005, 200.

36 Frazer 1983, 124–5.

37 Shorter 1973, 201.

of Jesus' blood surpasses all other ritual types of blood because Christ offered himself willingly. According to the Gospel of John (cf. 19:31), while lambs were being sent to the Temple to be prayed over and slaughtered for the "Great Solemnity" – the Passover – Jesus mounted the wood of the cross becoming a willing victim. Also, while those sacrificial lambs for the Passover were being sacrificed in the Temple, Jesus died with his consent.

John presents Jesus as the Lamb of God; the one sent to redeem the world (cf. John 1:29); the one who is the Word of God (cf. John 1:1–3); the one who gave himself as food for the journey to eternal life. The book of Revelation echoes that the blood of the Lamb of God washes away human sins (cf. Rev 1:5; 7:14), pays ransom and confers on believers a royal priesthood (Rev 5:9–10: cf. 1 Pet 2:9). The blood of Jesus became a propelling force for the martyrs to vanquish Satan (cf. Rev 12:11); and in turn, they shed their own blood to gain eternal life (cf. Rev 18:21–24).

Paul finds meaning in the cross of Christ. With his blood, Jesus fulfils the role of propitiation in expiation (cf. Rom 3:21–26). Through him humanity is justified (cf. Rom 5:6–11), ransomed (cf. Eph 1:7) and acquired by God (cf. Acts 20:28). Jesus reconciles the Jews and the Gentiles (cf. Eph 2:13) and became the bridge between humans and the celestial powers (cf. Col 1:20). Human beings share in this blood of the new covenant when they drink of the Eucharistic cup (cf. 1 Cor 10:16; 11:23–28). In the Eucharist, his salvific death is recalled, and his coming is always announced (cf. 1 Cor 11:26) until the Parousia.³⁸

Jesus' blood is declared to have become the only effective agent of purification (cf. Heb 9:20) for the remission of sins (cf. Heb 9:22). His blood surpasses that of animals (cf. Heb 9:12). With the blood of Jesus, comes eternal redemption (cf. Heb 9:12), through which humans gain access to the sanctuary (cf. Heb 10:19). His blood initiates the new and eternal covenant (cf. Heb 13:20) and cries out more loudly for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Heb 12:24) as it is sprinkled upon all of humanity (cf. 1 Pet 1:2). This blood of the innocent lamb of God (cf. 1 Pet 1:19) purifies humanity (cf. 1 John 1:7) and delivers them from their sins (cf. Rev 1:5). Christ purchases humanity with his blood (cf. Rev 5:9) and by his blood the saints are victorious (cf. Rev 12:11) through a disciplined life; and in

38 In Ewe cosmology, there is no concept analogous to the Christian doctrine of the Parousia. Instead, the afterlife is envisioned as a land of the dead—a spiritual realm where the deceased hope to dwell in peace and joy. Entry into this ancestral domain is believed to be contingent upon one's moral conduct in life; good deeds are thought to secure a favourable place among the ancestors, who continue to play an active role in the spiritual and communal life of the living. See Mbiti 1969, 23; Adedeji 2012, 52.

no other name is salvation attained (cf. Acts 4:9–12; 14:3) but Jesus and so, his believers use his name to perform miracles.

Jesus not only accomplished salvation through his blood; he also healed the sick, fed the hungry, calmed storms, and restored the dead to life. Yet, he did not save himself (cf. Matt 27:42). This paradox reflects the theological principle that a life offered as ransom saves others, not itself. Had Jesus chosen to save himself, it would have marked a withdrawal from his redemptive mission and a forsaking of those entrusted to him – those for whom he came to give life and whom he calls his own (cf. John 10:14–15). The salvation Jesus offers is deliverance from judgment (cf. John 12:47) and from the wrath of God (cf. Rom 5:9–11). As the Son, he appeased God through an atoning sacrifice, the price of which was his own human and divine blood. In doing so, he brought life and immortality to light (cf. 2 Tim 1:10), for he alone possesses the power to grant eternal life (cf. John 6:54).

Finally, John 6 affirms that those who eat the body of Jesus and drink his blood will have eternal life. Through participation in the Eucharistic cup, human beings share in his life (cf. 1 Cor 11:23–28). This ritual establishes a profound bond between Jesus and those who partake of his flesh and blood (cf. John 6:51–71). In the Eucharist, his salvific death is both remembered and his return anticipated (cf. 1 Cor 11:26). Within this salvific act, the judgment of sin is lifted (cf. John 12:47) through the forgiveness of sins, as expressed in the Institution Narratives of the Last Supper, where Jesus offers the cup as “the blood of the new covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,” and invites the apostles to drink (cf. Matt 26:28). Thus, all who receive him find eternal life in him (cf. John 1:4; 6:35–40).³⁹

4. Intercultural Intersections and Points of Departure

In covenantal rituals sealed with blood, participants consumed the flesh and, in some traditions the blood of the sacrificial animal, a symbolic act affirming shared life and mutual obligation. In Christian theology, this finds profound resonance in the Eucharist, where believers partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, receiving life through his sacrificial offering (cf. Matt 26:28; John 6:51–59). Both frameworks affirm that blood represents life and mediates salvation.⁴⁰

39 There are series of Eucharistic miracles in the world, where the bread and the wine turned into Jesus' flesh and blood with blood group AB. See Dalpiaz 2009; Salakpi 2021.

40 See note 2.

Across Christian traditions, including those beyond the Eve context, the blood of Jesus is regarded as spiritually potent – capable of sustaining life and warding off evil, much like the protective function of blood in the Passover narrative (cf. Exod 12:1–13:16). This belief found contemporary expression during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some pastors in Ghana encouraged congregants to symbolically mark their doorposts with the blood of Jesus as a gesture of divine protection.⁴¹

The blood of Jesus surpasses all other ritual blood because Christ offered himself willingly. In contrast, among the Eve, the offering of human blood in the past was primarily associated with succession to the stool: a mother who permitted her son to be sacrificed secured chieftaincy rights for her other children after the father's death. Such rituals are no longer practised. In Jesus, however, the purpose of the sacrifice is the redemption of sinful humanity – for those who heed his voice and repent. His sacrifice is superior precisely because he consented to die. In the sacrificial systems of both the Eve and the ancient Jews, animals were offered without consent. Both traditions hold that their sacrificial offerings are accepted and that salvation is thereby attained. Yet, notably, neither Eve nor Jewish practitioners invoke the names of sacrificial animals – such as goats, sheep, or cattle – when performing miracles. In contrast, believers in Jesus continue to perform signs and wonders in his name, affirming that salvation is found in him alone (cf. Acts 4:9–12; 14:3).

The blood of sacrificial animals does not save the animals themselves but is offered on behalf of others. Likewise, Jesus did not save himself (cf. Matt 27:42); as with goats, lambs, and cows used in ritual sacrifice, the victim bears the cost for the sake of another. Such victims often become objects of scorn. Among the Eve, sacrifices are sometimes placed at crossroads to provoke public contempt – people are expected to avert their gaze from the filth and stench, believing that the more the object is scorned, the more effectively it absorbs and wards off evil. Similarly, Jesus on the cross became an object of mockery and rejection, yet in that very act, he bore and removed the evil that plagued humanity. Unlike animal sacrifices, which must be repeated and cannot confer eternal life, Christ offers a life of immortality (cf. 2 Tim 1:10), for only he has the power to grant eternal salvation.

In both Jewish and Eve traditions, the blood of sacrificial animals is believed to appease human sin. It is thought to remove guilt, ward off evil, and restore order to a disordered creation (cf. Eph 5:26–27). The relief that follows the sacrifice is understood as salvation for the one on whose behalf the offering is made. Blood thus functions as a purifying agent and, in some cases, as an

41 Asamoah-Gyadu 2020.

instrument of judgment against forces obstructing salvation. Among the Eve, human blood may be used as a last resort due to its perceived efficacy.⁴² From this perspective, the Eve – and by extension, Eve Christians – recognise the potency of blood in atonement, and regard human blood as especially powerful. Within Christian theology, the atoning sacrifice is the Son of God himself, whose blood is both human and divine – understood to be more efficacious than the blood of goats or rams, embodying the ultimate convergence of humanity and divinity in the quest for redemption.

Conclusion

An understanding of cultural practices does not necessarily entail belief in or adherence to them. However, for Eve Christians, familiarity with their indigenous worldview can enhance their engagement with the Christian message of salvation. This study has shown that key elements within Eve cosmology, particularly the symbolism of blood, the mediation of well-being, and the confrontation with evil, offer conceptual bridges that can deepen theological reflection and contextual appropriation of Christian faith. The convergence between Eve and Christian understandings of salvation lies in their shared emphasis on the defeat of evil and the restoration of life.

In the Old Testament, salvation is portrayed as divine intervention on behalf of humanity, with Yahweh as the source of deliverance. In the New Testament, salvation is articulated as God's definitive victory over evil through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Among the Eve, salvation – expressed as *ɔ̃agbɛ*, or holistic well-being – is granted by God and mediated through the gods and ancestors, particularly in response to the threat of evil. While the theological frameworks differ, both traditions identify evil as the central existential challenge and affirm that salvation entails its overcoming.

Christian theology locates this victory in the person and work of Jesus Christ, whose blood is understood as the ultimate means of redemption. For Eve Christians, this invites a contextualised discipleship that takes seriously both the resources of their cultural heritage and the demands of Christian

42 This comparative reflection draws on intercultural soteriological perspectives that recognise the symbolic and efficacious role of blood in atonement across diverse traditions. The Eve practice highlights the potency of human blood as a last resort, which resonates with Christian theological emphasis on the unique and divine efficacy of Christ's sacrificial blood (cf. Heb 9:12–14). Such parallels invite further dialogue on the intersection of indigenous ritual praxis and Christian soteriology, without collapsing distinct doctrinal boundaries.

teaching. The integration of these frameworks requires critical discernment, but also offers a fertile ground for theological synthesis, ethical formation, and spiritual resilience.

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Survival and Wellbeing as Salvation: A Study in the Hagar Narratives in Genesis from Dalit Feminine Perspective

John Baptist Antony

Introduction

Dalits in general, and Dalit women in particular, across India and South Asia continue to face systemic barriers to economic survival, social dignity, and a life of basic well-being. They are under constant threat of being attacked, raped and killed. What can the Bible offer them in this context of poverty, violence and trauma Dalit women face? Can it offer hope of salvation? Can exegetes bring out a message of salvation from the biblical texts so that the Dalits, victims of a particular cultural identity, can view it as something real and tangible? These are some of the concerns this study addresses. This chapter attempts to argue that salvation in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, is a worldly experience and offers hope to the underprivileged. First, I proceed by clarifying how salvation is understood, drawing inspiration from theological trends in liberation theology; second, I present some methodological considerations about Dalit Feminist Biblical Scholarship; and third, I present the concept of survival and well-being in the Hagar narratives (Gen 16:1–16; 21:8–21), concentrating on five motifs. The chapter will then conclude by suggesting some hermeneutical reflections on Dalit women, their lives, liberation and emancipation.

1. Salvation in Liberation Theology

Liberation Theology places liberation at the heart of theology and views the various fields of theology from that perspective. When explaining the relationship between liberation and salvation, Gustavo Gutierrez uses the formula, “From the quantitative to the qualitative.” He explains “quantitative” as an extensive aspect of salvation; that is, salvation in reference to the number of persons saved and the role of the Church in this process. The quantitative approach seeks to link the universality of salvation and the role of the Church as a mediator of salvation. But for Gutierrez, “a *qualitative and intense*

approach replaces a *quantitative and extensive* one.”¹ He explains qualitative thus: “Salvation is not something otherworldly, concerning which the present life is merely a test. Salvation ... is something which *embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness* in Christ: ... This fulfilment *embraces every aspect of humanity: body and spirit, individual and society, person and cosmos, time and eternity*.”² Salvation therefore is an intra-historical reality that “orients, transforms, and guides history to its fulfilment.”³

It follows that there are no two parallel histories, one profane and another sacred. Rather for Gutierrez, “The history of salvation is the very heart of human history.”⁴ Hence, whatever humanity and the church do needs to be understood from this perspective. In his words, “To work, to transform this world, is to build the human community; it is also to save. Likewise, *to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of the saving action*, which is moving towards its complete fulfilment. It is to become part of a saving process which embraces the whole of humanity and all human history.”⁵ Therefore, profane and sacred work are connected. Whatever is done to enhance humanity and a dignified way of life is also a salvific work. This understanding helps the subalterns who struggle for survival and a decent living.⁶ Therefore, their struggles would be valued as being part of a salvific process.

Biblically, salvation is understood as divine help in adverse circumstances in which God’s people find themselves. According to John E. Alsup, “God rescues and delivers from the situation of opposition and peril to one of recovered spaciousness, prosperity, and well-being.”⁷ Combining the perspectives of Gutierrez and Alsup, salvation emerges as the work of both God and humans. The story of Hagar, narrated in the Book of Genesis (Gen 16:1–16; 21:8–21), can be read as perceiving salvation in this sense. I will examine it using the method of narratology, and from the perspective of Dalit women when reading it.

1 Gutierrez 1988, 84.

2 Gutierrez 1988, 85, emphasis added.

3 Gutierrez 1988, 86.

4 Gutierrez 1988, 86.

5 Gutierrez 1988, 91, emphasis added.

6 According to Wilfred, “We need to reflect upon the issue of salvation in new terms in which the well-being is an integral part.” Wilfred 2005, 321.

7 Alsup 1999, 894.

2. Dalit Women, the Readers

2.1 Who are Dalit Women?

Reader-response theory consciously identifies specific readers, considering who they are and what their standpoints are. Liberation Theology moved the “reader” from being individuals to a community of the “poor.” Drawing inspiration from there, other interpretations began to arise: Afro-American, Black, and Dalit readings, sometimes combined with feminist interpretations, gendered or queer readings, ecological readings, and many others. Drawing inspiration from the interpretation of the Hagar narrative by Delores S. Williams from an Afro-American woman’s perspective,⁸ I study scripture from the Dalit Woman’s Perspective, and call it Dalit Feminist Biblical Scholarship.

Dalits are the outcastes of the Indian (South Asian) caste system, which is hierarchical and compartmentalised in such a way that mobility to other castes is not possible. One is born into a caste and remains in it till death, and even afterward, since there are even cemeteries based on castes. Dalits are not part of the four-caste hierarchy, but are outcastes (*avarnas*, meaning “no castes”). Economically they are poor, socially oppressed, and considered religiously impure and polluted. Dalit women are the last and the least in this system. B. R. Ambedkar, the liberator of Dalits in India, defined them as the last pot in the customary Indian household arrangement of pots, one upon the other, each representing the different castes. Each pot has the men on top and the women of that caste under them. Thus, Dalit women, being at the bottom, are the “Dalits of Dalits.” They experience triple oppression or alienation: Class, Caste and Gender because they are poor, Dalit and women.⁹

Feminism, a relatively late arrival in the Indian socio-political landscape, remains predominantly shaped by high-caste and mainstream narratives. It has yet to adequately engage the complex heterogeneity and intersectionality that characterise the lived realities of women across caste, class, religion, region, and ethnicity. Some realities specific to Dalit women, such as (i) Dalit patriarchy, (ii) denied access to their sexuality, (iii) rape of Dalit women as an attack on the Dalits, and (iv) honour killing are not addressed by mainline feminism in India. Added to the above, Dalit women are left with the responsibility of taking care of the children, as in many cases the men are out in the fields or away from the village for work. It is difficult for Dalit women to provide food and the necessities of life to their children from the little they earn from their

⁸ Cf. Williams 1993.

⁹ Cf. Aloysius, Mangubhai and Lee 2020, 173–81.

menial jobs, such as agricultural labour in a rural setting and manual scavenging in the urban contexts. Dalit women work in unorganised sectors, which provide little legal protection and very poor payment.

2.2 Dalit Feminist Biblical Scholarship¹⁰

Though originating in Europe and America, feminist biblical scholarship is making slow inroads in Asia and India. Among the many variants or alternatives of this movement, I consider a liberationist approach as suitable for this study. This perspective recognises the political impact of the Bible. In the past, biblical texts and their interpretations were often used to 'legitimise' and 'legislate' oppressive practices over women both in society and religion. The proponents of the liberationist variant of feminist biblical scholarship consciously want to use biblical interpretation as a medium of liberation, especially for women.¹¹ This study proposes an emancipatory reading in favour of Dalit women.

In engaging a biblical text, it is imperative to critically attend to its patriarchal, androcentric, and exclusionary dimensions, as well as to the ways in which such features have historically been interpreted to serve the interests of a male-dominated ecclesial and socio-cultural order. Nevertheless, the theological thrust or emancipatory potential of the pericope under examination may diverge significantly from these inherited readings. I argue, "Though he (the sacred author) is heavily laden with patriarchal materials and stories, which are His-stories, in spite of the patriarchal and hierarchical situation of his time, he can bring out, indicate and point out to another value system, which is opposite of what the society was upholding. Thus, he was opposing the value system of his own time."¹²

Using Narrative Criticism, this is what I would like to demonstrate in this study, asking what messages the text communicates for the survival and well-being of the subaltern, i) in the biblical context, to Hagar and Ishmael, and ii) in the context of Dalit women. I will engage in some sections of the texts that communicate the motif of survival and well-being as salvation. These are: (i) The command to return and to submit (Gen 16:9); (ii) The well as the source of life; (iii) Inheritance versus scarcity of resources; (iv) The wilderness experience as near-death experience; (v) The promise of future descendants and an independent life, and their realisation.

10 Cf. Antony 2014, 21–35; Id. 2021, 495–513.

11 Cf. Antony 2014, 25, note 28.

12 Antony 2014, 27.

3. Survival and Wellbeing in the Hagar Narrative

The God of the Old Testament is primarily a saving or liberating God. This conception of God is spread throughout the biblical narratives, especially in the first book of the Old Testament.¹³ The narrative concerning Hagar (Gen 16:1–16; 21:9–21) is no exception, even though interpretative history has seen it only as a “side narrative” or “human initiative for progeny” instead of waiting for the intervention of God to act in his time.¹⁴ In the Hagar narrative, Yahweh is enacting salvific actions in favour of Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl (a foreigner and a slave) and her son, vis-a-vis Abraham and Sarai, the antagonists. Hagar and Ishmael are the protagonists.

3.1 The Command to Return and to Submit

The command “to return and to submit” (Gen 16:9) is shocking and scandalous alongside the Old Testament theology of God who saves, especially at a point of the story in which Hagar has achieved her freedom. Tribble calls it a “text of terror.”¹⁵ In line with Elsa Tamez and Delores Williams, though, it can be interpreted as “Using the Oppressor’s Resource as Survival Strategy” and as “Interim Measure.”¹⁶ Elsa Tamez explains, “What God wants is that she [Hagar] and the child should be saved, and at the moment, the only way to accomplish that is not in the desert, but by returning to the house of Abraham. Ishmael hasn’t been born. ... Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born in the house of Abraham to prove that he is the first-born (Deut 21:15–17), and to enter into the household through the rite of circumcision (chap. 17). This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Abraham.”¹⁷

Williams supports this interpretation.¹⁸ In her opinion, God provided a survival source and a new vision where Hagar saw none before. Williams names this interpretation a “womanist survival” or “quality-of-life” hermeneutic. Therefore, it can be said that God is helping Hagar “with the strategy of going back to the oppressor and making use of Abram’s resources to save her life and that of her child.”¹⁹

13 Cf. Gutierrez 1988, 86–7.

14 Williams 1993, 198.

15 Cf. Tribble 1984, 15.

16 Cf. Antony 2012, 137.

17 Tamez 1986, 137.

18 Williams 1993, 21.

19 Antony 2012, 137; cf. also Williams 1993, 196–8 and Weis 1996, 264.

According to Williams, the second episode involving Hagar (Gen 21), also exhibits the survival strategy. While in the first incident, God suggested to Hagar to make use of the resources available at Abraham's house, in the second incident, God does not provide resources but provides a vision enabling her to see the available resources in the wilderness (Gen 21:19).

3.2 The Well as Source of Life

The spring (cf. Gen 16:7) or well (cf. 16:14; 21:19) is the recurring theme in the Hagar narratives. In the biblical narratives, the well as a source of water is considered a source of life (cf. Gen 26:18; Num 20:1–13; Isa 12:3).

God opening the eyes of Hagar and her seeing a well of water in Gen 21:19 are survival motifs. Delores Williams says, "God provided Hagar with a new vision to see survival resources where she saw none before."²⁰ Unlike biblical narratives in Exodus that narrate God providing water from the rock for the people (cf. Exod 17:1–7; Num 20:1–13), here he only shows her where to find it.²¹ Abused and abandoned, Hagar is unable to see the well until God opens her eyes. God, in Gen 21, can only show the source for survival. It is then up to Hagar to go and use it. Accordingly, she goes and fills the skin with water and gives it to the boy to drink. Efforts are, therefore, required of the one to be saved.

3.3 Inheritance against Scarcity of Resources

Within patriarchal culture, inheritance functioned as a crucial source of survival and well-being (cf. Gen 15:18; Num 27:6–7; Deut 21:17). The second narrative about Hagar begins with Ishmael playing with Isaac, and Sarah demands, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (Gen 21:10).²² The "playing with" or "mocking of"²³ Ishmael is interpreted by Sarah as Ishmael's claim of legitimacy as heir.²⁴ Williams explains the issues involved in Gen 21:10:

²⁰ Williams 1993, 198.

²¹ Cf. Copeland 2020, 194.

²² It is to be noted that here Sarah, as in Gen 16, does not mention Hagar and Ishmael by name.

²³ Cf. Tribble 2006, 44 who sees it as indication of mocking.

²⁴ Cf. Tribble 2006, 45.

The responsibility for Sarah's sustenance and care would ordinarily fall upon the firstborn son as chief inheritor of his father's wealth. But if this firstborn son, Ishmael, also becomes head of the family and/or tribe, Sarah may have considerably less power and status than she has as a wife of Abraham.²⁵

In stark contrast to the wealth he possesses (cf. Gen 12:16; 13:2), Abraham offers the mother and his firstborn son only limited provisions and meagre sustenance for a journey devoid of clear destination. The scarcity of resources threatens the very existence of the mother and child in the wilderness.

Wandering in the wilderness without the head of the family (21:14) involves another predicament. Williams explains it, saying,

So Hagar and Ishmael, expelled from the family, or 'house,' of Abraham and Sarah, were not only without economic resources; they were without protection in a nomadic culture where men ruled the families, tribes and clans. As mother and child wander off into the desert of Beersheba, we cannot but wonder how their survival will be secured.²⁶

It is in this situation of scarcity that threatens life itself that God provides or shows the means of sustenance – first for survival and then well-being.

3.4 Wilderness Experience as Near-Death Experience

Twice Hagar is found in the "wilderness" (מִדְבָּר; 16:7; 21:14),²⁷ which in some of the biblical narratives stands for facing the difficulties of life all alone and being at the point of death.²⁸ The second narrative involving wilderness is more dramatic and descriptive than the first. On the way to Shur, Hagar sits by herself in 21:16, highlighting Hagar's helplessness and loneliness: "Having put the child on his deathbed, Hagar awaits his dreaded ending."²⁹ The only dialogue that Hagar speaks in the whole of the second episode, namely, "Do not let me look on the death of the child" (21:16), expresses on the one hand either

²⁵ Williams 1993, 27–8.

²⁶ Williams 1993, 30.

²⁷ The first one was her exodus; the second, an exile. Hagar lives both the experiences of future Israel in her life.

²⁸ Cf. Trible 2006, 48. Also cf. Williams 1993, 159–61 for a discussion on the wilderness experience as a more appropriate way to describe African-American existence in North America.

²⁹ Trible 2006, 48.

the inevitability of death or a near-death experience, and on the other, Hagar's longing for life. Thus, she denies death.³⁰

Then she lifts her voice, and weeps (21:16). Here, she becomes the first woman to cry in the Bible, mother of all weepers. The wordless cry of Hagar has been compared to that of Jesus, highlighting a shared depth of anguish:

The cry of Hagar and her son as that of Jesus, was not addressed to God as prayer as some would interpret (cf. Mark 15:37). It is the cry of anguish that comes from suffering and helpless humanity, as individual and as a community. This is the experience of victims of their time. But God, at least in Gen 21, considers it as a prayer and responds (v.17).³¹

God comes to their rescue immediately. After struggling for life and facing near death, Hagar and Ishmael experience God's intervention and his salvific acts (21:17–20): God hears the voice of the boy, an angel of God calls from heaven and addresses Hagar, God opens the eyes of Hagar to see the well of water so she can give the boy a drink, and finally God is with him.

Hagar, for her part, is involved in this process of saving when she is commanded to lift up the hand of the lad (21:18).³² She also does what is needed for the survival and well-being of her son: "She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink" (21:19), and finally she finds him a wife from Egypt (21:21).

3.5 Promise of Future Descendants and Independent Life and their Realisation

Both narratives involving Hagar contain many promises of God regarding Hagar and Ishmael's future. God promises innumerable descendants to Hagar in Gen 16:10, and in 21:13 and 18, God says that he will make a great nation of Ishmael. These promises are fulfilled to a certain extent in the respective narratives themselves.

³⁰ Cf. Tribble 2006, 48.

³¹ Antony 2022, 5.

³² Literally, Gen 21:18 means "make your hand firm upon him." It means lending support and encouragement to the child.

In the first narrative, the vocabulary used in the promises made to Hagar³³ is very similar to those employed in the promises made to Abraham.³⁴ Therefore, if to Abraham the promise is that he will become a patriarch, the promise made to Hagar is that she will be a matriarch. Towards the end of Gen 16, we see at least some positive mention about Hagar's survival and well-being. Hagar is back in Abraham's tent for the time being as a survival strategy. Thus, their survival (mother and child) is secure. Moreover, she gives birth to Ishmael (mentioned three times in verses 15–16), and Abraham names him.³⁵ Hagar is referred to by name, not by her status as a slave or an Egyptian as in Gen 16:1. She is now remembered only as the mother of Ishmael, whom she "bore to Abram."

In the second narrative, God makes a promise to Abraham about Ishmael, declaring, "As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring" (21:13). Again in v.18, the Lord says to Hagar, "for I will make a great nation of him" (21:18). The promises made to Hagar in Gen 16:10 are transferred to Ishmael in 21:18.

The closing verses of Gen 21 (vv.19–21) contain many indicators to prove that the promises regarding their survival and well-being are fulfilled. (i) Survival: The narrator reports, "Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink" (21:19). So, Hagar and Ishmael survive in the desert. (ii) Home: It is said of Ishmael that "he grew up; he lived in the wilderness" (21:20), and "he lived in the wilderness of Paran" (21:21). Therefore, he now has a home; he is no longer a wanderer or fugitive. (iii) Occupation: To survive in the desert, he has learned an occupation – he "became an expert with the bow" (21:20). This may have increased his wealth. (iv) Family: Hagar, mentioned as a mother, "took a wife" for Ishmael from Egypt (21:21b), which is something ordinarily performed by a male. (v) Tribe: On finding a wife for Ishmael from Egypt, Hagar founds a new tribe of her own.

As a conclusion to this section, we can say that although the Genesis narrative is mainly about Abraham, the study of the Hagar narratives reveals that God's care also extends to the family of Hagar and Ishmael. He guides them through the wilderness and they confront near-death experiences, saves them

33 It is very rare that a woman receives the promise of a multitude of descendants. At most, they are promised a son. Cf. Gen 17:19; Isa 7:14; Matt 1:21; Luke 1:13.

34 Compare Gen 16:10 with 13:16; 15:5; 17:2. Common words include count, descendants, multiply, offspring, multitude, numerous, etc.

35 It stresses the fatherhood of Abram and exalts him but denies Hagar the power which the messenger gave her. Cf. Trible 2006, 41. This also indicates that "... he [Ishmael] is the legitimate son of Abram and Hagar with full rights of a first born. The situation would be different had he been born in the desert." Antony 2012, 160.

and gives them well-being. We can then transpose this to other contexts, particularly to that of Dalit Women.³⁶

4. Hermeneutical Reflections on Salvation for Dalit Women

The above exegetical study revolves around saving life and developing the quality of life. The latter can also include freedom and dignity as part of the salvation project. This does not mean that salvation is related solely to matter or the material domain. But I argue that satisfying the material need is a prerequisite to salvation and is indeed one aspect of salvation. Felix Wilfred would argue this way:

Salvation is not a *struggle against matter* but a *struggle with the spirit against the negation of matter* – matter that is an essential pre-requisite for life. The battle against the negation of matter is not simply a ‘material’ struggle. The contrast is not between material and spiritual, but between *life and death*.³⁷

With this understanding of salvation and drawing inspiration from the above study on Hagar, some reflections that would aid the emancipation and liberation of Dalit women are in order.

4.1 Survival as a Salvific Experience

Dalit women, especially when they are left without their husbands, but have children to take care of, literally struggle for survival and battle to meet their economic needs, such as food, drinking water,³⁸ clothing, and shelter. They are like Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, living near-death experiences. Their efforts and attempts to achieve these necessities of livelihood are liberational and salvific experiences. Their struggle for daily survival should not be interpreted as though they do not have any higher ideals, values or utopias. They do have them, and these are expressed in and through their songs, laments, rituals, creation myths, feasts, pilgrimages, millenarianism and religious

36 Cf. Russell 2006, 191–2.

37 Wilfred 2005, 313.

38 Women must travel greater distances to fetch water for household use. As they are considered impure, Dalit women, in particular, are prohibited from taking water from the common well or pond.

experiences.³⁹ To survive and live as human beings, they first must face the hard realities of life, such as poverty, economic exploitation, and caste and gender oppression. So, they set what is called “meantime” imminent goals for their lives. These are called “dreams of the possible worlds,” which are practical, concrete and tangible.⁴⁰ Viramma, a Dalit woman, in a narrative of her life, brings these two points together, but prioritises survival and material needs over her utopias. She says,

You want to fight to bring us together and make caste disappear. But it's impossible. We haven't got a field or any land, nothing but the house we live in: so how do you expect us to live? If you want to fight for us, the poor, give us some money to buy some land or share our land for us to cultivate. Give us a cow, a goat, a pair of oxen, and we'll be able to make our living, eat our fill and have plenty of children. They could study, have a job.⁴¹

The Dalits, especially the Dalit women as homemakers of Dalit families have learned the survival strategy to live in hard situations. They also have other resources and strength with which to achieve them, such as being hardworking, strong, self-reliant, autonomous, committed to family, religious and pious.⁴² Using these resources they can work out their survival and well-being.

4.2 Well-being

If survival with limited resources and bringing up a family in spite of hard situations is the primary problem that Dalit women face, the struggle for a decent and dignified life is another challenge for them. This includes, among many other aspects, good health, security and safety, education, freedom to choose a profession and life partner, access to social structures such as educational institutes, public places, temple entry, and participation in worship.

In the Indian rural setting, in their attempt to achieve these, Dalit women undergo sexual harassment and advances from men of their castes and other higher castes. Compared to the sexual harassment faced by other women, there are some specific nuances suffered by Dalit women. The caste and patriarchal

39 Cf. Scott 1990, 81; Id. 1985, 332–3. Utopian beliefs are the negation of existing exploitation and status degradation.

40 Cf. Parish 1997, 224.

41 Viramma and Racine 2000, 182.

42 Dalit culture, symbolic resources, survival strategies, uniting leadership and Dalit studies are some of their resources. Cf. Wilfred 2005, 174–9. On how Dalit women survive, refer to the autobiographies of Dalit women (e.g. cf. Bama 2005; Pawar 2008).

mindset justify such advancements saying that Dalit women, their bodies and sexuality, are “easily available.” In some cases, men of high castes rape them and impregnate them without owning responsibility.⁴³ Hence, there is a phenomenon of unwed mothers and single parenting in Dalit villages.

During times of caste conflicts, Dalit women always face the danger of being raped and killed. Raping Dalit women is considered the greatest humiliation that can be inflicted on Dalit men, because according to the patriarchal mindset, Dalit men are supposed to safeguard the sexuality and virginity of their women. As slave owners had complete authority over the body and the reproductive capacities of their slaves, so too in the cases of rape, forced marriage and child marriage, Dalit women have no control over their bodies and reproductive capacities. They are considered the property of upper caste men and Dalit men alike.

In many instances, Dalit women seem to suffer oppression without any signs of resistance. But it is not without its reason:

In spite of the dark picture of their life, Dalit women and Hagar have a strong sense of ‘for-the-sake-of-the-children.’ Both undergo suffering and make sacrifices for the sake of their children. They wish to see their children in a better economic and social status than what they are in now.⁴⁴

Complying with the suffering with the hope of the future of their children is the eschatological dimension of salvation for them.

There are also instances of struggle for autonomy, independence, and self-determination, through resistance, rebellion and revolt, which involve defiance, taking risks, endurance, and stamina to hold things together for the family even when there is no support from the partner or husband. These struggles, undertaken at great risk, are signs of hope.

In concluding this exploration of survival and well-being, it may be affirmed that for them (Dalit women), the primary concern is to survive. They do not hesitate to use the space and opportunities that are available at hand. Once survival is assured, day by day, they try to improve the quality of life in various areas such as economic growth, education, social standing etc.⁴⁵

43 Cf. Rege 1995, 18–36.

44 Antony 2012, 168.

45 Antony 2012, 171. Also cf. Wilfred 2005, 313.

4.3 Theology and Religion for Survival and Well-Being

In the Hagar Narratives, it is God's intervention that saved Hagar and her child from death, showed them the resources and made life possible in the desert through an occupation, family and progeny. So too, the role of religion and theology is important for the emancipation or salvation of Dalit women as they struggle daily for survival and well-being. Today's subalterns still hold on to God and religion as their final hope.⁴⁶ Therefore, religion and theology do play an important role in the salvific process of Dalit women. Below are some of the indicators for the role that theology can play in the salvation project of Dalit Women.

a. Affirm their experiences: Just as God and his messenger invited Hagar to speak and make her claim (cf. Gen 16:8; 21:17), the theological discourse on salvation should value and affirm the experiences of Dalit women with all their nuances and specificities. They need to be considered as dialogue partners in any discourse, including theological discourse.

b. Assert their aspirations and religiosity: The religiosity of subalterns is different from that imposed on them. On the religiosity of the marginalised, Felix Wilfred notes, "Precisely because the experience of the poor is a constant struggle for the attainment of material needs which seem to elude them, their practice of religion is very much centred on the material condition of life – its presence or absence."⁴⁷ In Indic religious traditions, the religiosity of subaltern communities is closely tied to the material conditions of life and their fulfilment. This embodied spirituality is evident in their rituals, festivals, and symbolic expressions. Such practices should not be dismissed as low, profane, or merely "materialistic," but rather recognised and affirmed as meaningful forms of religious engagement. The spaces in which this religiosity is expressed – churches, temples, mosques, and pilgrimage sites – serve as loci of hope and resilience for these communities.

c. Efforts for survival and well-being are a daily struggle, which should be approached with the belief that God will provide them as he did for Hagar and Ishmael. This can provide them with the hope to carry on. The individual and the community that works out its own material survival and well-being can discover the grace and love of God amidst their struggles.⁴⁸

46 There is a saying, *Thikatravarku theivame thunai* (for the people without hope, God is the only hope).

47 Wilfred 2005, 322.

48 Cf. Russell 2006, 195.

d. Like Hagar, Dalit women may not have a complete blueprint of their struggle for survival. They only have to believe that God will perfect it and bring it to fulfilment and completion. This is the aspect of transcendence, eschatological hope and mystery that God, in his own way and time, will bring their liberating efforts to fruition.

Conclusion

This study, therefore, understands salvation as something that embraces all aspects of humanity, including the bodily and material.

It is fitting to conclude this reflection by endorsing Felix Wilfred's incisive observation:

Their [subaltern's] quest for material benefits is a real and serious question. It is a question that concerns their well-being and wholeness. Today, any serious discourse on salvation needs to begin at this level of well-being; that is, with reference to the experiences of everyday life of the subalterns.⁴⁹

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49 Felix Wilfred 2005, 324.

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Meeting Between Divinity and Humanity as a Paradigm for Advancing Intercultural Dialogical Hermeneutics: An Intertextual Dialogue Between Abraham's Arbitration (Gen 18:22b–33) and Pottan Theyyam

Jobymon Skaria

Introduction

Indian biblical scholars have already noted the shortcomings of historical criticism for contextualising the Bible for Indian readers.¹ Most importantly, George Soares-Prabhu, while proposing a dialogical hermeneutics relevant to the Indian contexts in the 1980s, highlighted that historical criticism is monocultural, ideologically loaded, and therefore ineffective and irrelevant for Indian readers who live in multicultural and multireligious contexts.² Soares-Prabhu bases his critique on three primary issues. First, he argues that the method is ineffective as it is not suited for the interpretation of religious texts when it must deal with qualitative rather than quantitative realities. Second, he posits that the method is irrelevant since it seldom speaks to the actual needs of the community to be served and instructed by the interpretation. Finally, Soares-Prabhu asserts that the method is ideologically loaded, as it remains a product of post-Enlightenment Western thought and reflects values foreign to the Indian situation.³

Although critical of it, Soares-Prabhu did not promote discarding historical criticism entirely.⁴ On the contrary, scholars such as Soares-Prabhu believed that historical criticism is a valuable hermeneutical tool for bridging the distance between the Indian readers living in the present and the biblical texts that emerged in the historical past.⁵ Given this trajectory, scholars like

1 Cf. Soares-Prabhu 1999, 207–22, originally published in *Bible Bhashyam* 6 (1980), 151–70.

2 Karimundackal 2021: 42–65.

3 Cf. Lategan 2015, 18 for more details.

4 Cf. Soares-Prabhu 1991, 73.

5 Cf. Soares-Prabhu 1991, 73; Runesson 2010, 92.

Soares-Prabhu advocated that Indian biblical hermeneutics complement historical criticism with Indian contextual realities such as religious pluralism, diversity and social oppression.⁶ Most importantly, by the late twentieth century, many scholars who shared Soares-Prabhu's proposals began to argue that the monocultural perspectives of historical criticism would relegate Indian religious texts to valueless myths and fables, thereby alienating Indian readers from their traditional cultures.⁷ Similar discontentment with the efficacy of historical criticism in India's diverse contexts prompted scholars to propose new contextualised ways of reading the Bible from Dalit, Adivasi and tribal perspectives in India.⁸

Emerging from the late 1970s and 1980s, Indian contextual theologies, such as Dalit, and later Adivasi and Tribal theologies from the 1990s onward, provide significant opportunities to theologise in India's diverse contexts, to engage with the voices and experiences of marginalised communities, to enrich and expand the scope of theological reflection and understanding in the Indian context. Yet, at times, these contextual theologies, I suggest, tend to overlook the diversity, difference, and otherness based on casteist, linguistic and ethnic identities in the Indian subcontinent.⁹ Vedanayagam Devasahayam, often recognised as a pioneer of Dalit theology, articulates a creative tension between biblical traditions and Dalit contexts in his 2008 article. According to Devasahayam, the Gospel and culture should be related in a theologising endeavour, which affirms the liberating elements in Dalits' culture and rejects the demonising elements in Dalits' culture.¹⁰ Seen from the Indian pluralistic perspective, I have reservations about Devasahayam's proposal since it overlooks the plurality of written scriptures – including both biblical texts and the diverse religious scriptures of India – and significantly privileges biblical traditions over local traditions. Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau further clarify this tendency:

That Asia is polyscriptural has been well-argued, but most Asian biblical critics do not give Asian scriptures the same respect they give Judeo-Christian scriptures. A strong spirit of conservatism elevates Judeo-Christian scriptures above

6 Cf. Soares-Prabhu 1991, 73.

7 Cf. Broadbent 2012, 63.

8 Cf. Rajkumar 2016; Kerketta 2009, Haokip 2014.

9 Cf. Chacko 2022, 213.

10 Cf. Devasahayam 2008, 77.

Asian scriptures and Asian cultures, with the latter being treated as a means for making sense of the former.¹¹

The possible colonialist and dualistic tendencies noted in Indian biblical hermeneutics, I fear, can place the local traditions at the periphery of biblical hermeneutics in India.¹² This is problematic in India's polyscriptural and multicultural contexts, given the country's rich diversity in terms of religions, languages, regional differences, and its ethnic, economic and cultural disparities. Embracing these differences and celebrating diversity requires a change in mentality, and a celebration of differences and diversity in Indian biblical hermeneutics, I think, could be a successful strategy. Regarding a different Asian context and its divergence between the West and the East, Jung Young Lee argues that "their difference should be regarded not as a source of conflict but as a basis for mutual fulfilment. Their contextual difference will enrich a holistic understanding of the Christian faith."¹³ Most importantly, Archie C. C. Lee, after recognising the significance of the Asian polyscriptural reality, calls for a cross-scriptural reading, which intertwines biblical texts with Asian scriptures.¹⁴ Lee posits this approach as a mechanism for reciprocal enrichment and rectification. Engaging in a dialogue between the Bible and Asian scriptures, as Lee imagines, allows for the re-examination of the Bible in a manner that would facilitate new interpretations and meanings, which may not emerge if the Bible were not studied in dialogue with the Asian realities.¹⁵

Within this trajectory, I suggest the meeting between divinity and humanity narrated in Abraham's arbitration with Yahweh (Gen 18:22b-33) and the Dalit version of Pottan Theyyam¹⁶, an Indian subaltern ritualistic art, as dialogue partners for advancing dialogical biblical hermeneutics in India. Pottan Theyyam is one of the best-known ritual arts from North Malabar, Kerala. It depicts an avatar of Lord Shiva,¹⁷ one of the principal deities of Hinduism, in front of Sree Shankaracharya, a dominant caste scholar. According to this

11 Havea and Lau 2015, 7.

12 Cf. Skaria 2003, 63.

13 Lee 1996, 17.

14 Cf. Lee 2009, 23.

15 Cf. Chia 2021, 123.

16 The word Pottan comes from Malayalam, Kerala's local language. It can be translated as deaf in Malayalam, where it connotes a fool in the popular imagination. Theyyam is a cultural art form from the northern parts of Kerala, India. There are more than 450 Theyyams altogether. Pottan Theyyam is the most popular among them. Cf. Appavoo 1986.

17 In Hinduism, avatars of Vishnu are understood as divine incarnations that descend to earth to empower good and overcome evil, relieving the burden of the universe and restoring balance.

tradition, Lord Shiva appeared disguised as a Dalit, whom the society considered untouchable at that time.¹⁸ Shankaracharya reportedly instructed the Dalit man to move aside, citing concerns about ritual purity associated with caste norms. Disguised as a Dalit man, Lord Shiva refused to move out of his way and opened a set of arguments with Shankaracharya in which Lord Shiva exposed the caste system's insignificance.

Challenging the status quo, Pottan's character goes on to convey a sharp commentary on issues such as inequality, oppression and injustice. By embodying the struggles of the socially disenfranchised members of society, Pottan Theyyam thus becomes a potent platform for highlighting social realities and advocating for change, and a compelling form of social critique and expression. The proposed intertextual dialogue between Abraham's arbitration and Pottan Theyyam's arbitration, as I see it, would not be a colonial view from Abraham's arbitration to Pottan Theyyam, which could significantly relegate the relevance of Pottan Theyyam. Instead, as will be further clarified, my intertextual reading prefers constructive dialogues that anticipate the multi-scriptural reality of the scriptures in India and their relationships with various faith communities.

1. Relevance of the Arbitration Between Abraham and Pottan Theyyam

Admittedly, Abraham's negotiation with Yahweh as narrated in Gen 18:22b-33 and Pottan Theyyam are unrelated texts. Both narrate a meeting between divinity and humanity in two distinct cultural contexts. As a large segment of scholars tend to believe, Gen 18:22b-33 emerged in postexilic Yehud (the territory around Jerusalem under Persian rule from the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE),¹⁹ while Pottan Theyyam is a literary construct developed thousands of miles away in Kerala, India.²⁰ Hence, these accounts include historical, cultural and geographical differences. Both narratives include a challenge from one character to another. While Abraham challenges the divine in Gen 18:22b-33, the divine challenges humanity in Pottan Theyyam. In addition, both narratives creatively address perceived dilemmas. Scholars tend to understand Abraham's dialogue as a theological view generated in postexilic Yehud to address the theological dilemmas that emerged after the destruction and

18 The precise historical date of this account is uncertain; it is preserved in longstanding religious narratives and devotional texts.

19 Cf. Kilian 1996, 109; Goldingay 2020, 48; Nömmik 2012, 195.

20 Cf. Skaria 2022, 59.

rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple.²¹ Pottan Theyyam, on the other hand, is a social satire that emerged in response to the caste system and various cultural contradictions in society.²² It provides ethical guidance, religious ideals and spiritual strength to the society.

The geographical, historical, and cultural contradictions existing between the two narratives could complicate my attempt to bring the Abraham and Pottan narratives into dialogue. Kwok Pui-lan, for example, has already admitted the herculean task involved in bringing the biblical and Asian traditions together:

My hope to bring the biblical and Asian traditions together through dialogical imagination may have underestimated the fact that an Asian reads the Bible from a situation of great alienation. And I did not sufficiently problematise how the 'Asian story,' which is so diverse and complex, could be brought into a mutually illuminating relationship with the equally multifaceted 'biblical story'.²³

Pui-lan's cautious approach from an Asian optic is insightful. The absolutist claims of the biblical and the Asian traditions can mutually exclude each other.

Nevertheless, the arbitration narratives of Abraham and Pottan Theyyam reveal numerous multidimensional intersections, suggesting the potential for a mutually enriching dialogue through their interwoven engagement. First and foremost, these episodes unfold amidst social, religious and cultural dilemmas in distinct contexts, namely, Judea and Kerala, India. Abraham's arbitration, according to a large segment of scholars, is considered a literary addition to the original narrative in order to address the social, religious and cultural consequences of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.²⁴ Pottan Theyyam, on the other hand, is a literary construct to counter the social, religious, and cultural consequences of the concept of purity and pollution.²⁵ Similarly, Abraham's arbitration and Pottan Theyyam include a social praxis towards 'others'. For example, as will be explained, Abraham boldly expostulates with Yahweh on the possible role of violence in his administration of justice, and its impact upon innocent victims.²⁶ A similar preference for innocent victims of the caste system is evident in Pottan Theyyam also. For instance, Pottan Theyyam

21 Cf. Unsok Ro 2018, 105.

22 Cf. Ayrookuzhiel 1983, 170–81.

23 Pui-lan 2005, 42.

24 Cf. McConville 2006, 44.

25 Cf. Skaria 2022, 63.

26 Cf. Stoltzfus 2009, 36.

questions the dominant caste man who favours the dialectic of exclusion and inclusion based upon caste hegemony.²⁷ Most significantly, Pottan's reasoning, as will be explained below, calls for a boundary crossing, denouncing differences.²⁸ I suggest that these comparable perspectives and significance offer the necessary background for a transcultural conversation between Abraham's arbitration and the Pottan Theyyam narrative.

What I am not suggesting, however, is a colonial view that begins with the biblical tradition and moves toward the Indian tradition, which can relegate the Indian tradition to the biblical tradition. Rather, my reading prefers constructive dialogues that appreciate the multi-scriptural reality of the world's scriptures. Pablo Richard, while addressing the Latin American situation from a bottom-up hermeneutic, reminds us that biblical scholars must participate in the dialogue with indigenous cultures with humility since the indigenous people have lived thousands of years without the Bible.²⁹ Richard's proposal acknowledges the Bible and indigenous resources as two independent dialogue partners, working together to advance the biblical praxis. A similar intertextual and intercultural face-to-face conversation, which respects Gen 18:22b-33 in its originating context, vis-à-vis the subversive voices in Pottan Theyyam and its originating context, can help biblical scholars immensely.³⁰ This reading strategy seeks to suggest that Abraham and Pottan Theyyam become dialogue partners in their respective narratives, cultures, and contexts to further intercultural mobility and participation, transcending one's own realm of understanding to provide space to the other.

2. Abraham's Arbitration and Pottan Theyyam

Historical critical scholars, as already stated, interpret Gen 18:22b-33 as a later addition subsequent to the destruction of Jerusalem.³¹ Similarly, Ludwig Schmidt, Ehud Ben Zvi, Urmas Nömmik and Karin Schöpflin perceive this narrative as a theological text dealing with the postexilic community's dominant perspectives and worldviews.³² From a slightly different perspective, Joseph

27 Cf. Skaria 2022, 60.

28 Cf. Skaria 2022, 60.

29 Cf. Richard 2002, 297.

30 Cf. Pui-Ian 2003, 12.

31 Cf. Westermann 1985, 287–8.

32 Cf. Schmidt 1976, 164; Ben Zvi 1992, 27–46; Nömmik 2012, 195–208; Schöpflin 2009, 111.

Blenkinsopp argues that Gen 18:22b-33 is a counter-discourse to dominant Second Temple attitudes.³³ According to him, Abraham's dialogue:

... is not of the usual kind that serves to display the character or intentions of the speaker. It is programmatic, in the sense of being set up deliberately to address problems of a theological or moral nature raised by the proposed annihilation of the city by divine decree.³⁴

This historical-critical interpretation exposes Abraham's critique towards possible violence in the character of God.³⁵ For example, Abraham asks, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (18:24). This question, although it primarily challenged God's justice in allowing Jerusalem to be destroyed by the Babylonians,³⁶ would have been ontological for its Second Temple audience as a way of challenging the notion of "local" as "static identity" or "set position," when viewed against the centripetal and inward-looking forces of the early Second Temple period as described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. For instance, Ezra and Nehemiah projected the returning members of the Golah community as God's holy seed (Ezra 9:2).³⁷ This exclusivist self-designation of the local community probably emerged out of religio-political necessities, requiring separation from foreigners such as the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites expressed in the prohibition of exogamy.³⁸ Inter-marriage with these groups, according to this perspective, made it difficult, if not impossible, to observe the Torah.³⁹

The prohibition on inter-marriage and expulsion of foreign wives along with their children (cf. Ezra 10:44), probably in view of preserving the community's purity and maintaining its economic holdings,⁴⁰ might have aided the Second Temple community to reinforce socio-religious boundaries.⁴¹ However, there were many innocent victims, whom the Second Temple dominant perspective, as narrated in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, overlooked. For example, the text does not name the divorced wives or their children. So too, it neglects their

33 Cf. Blenkinsopp 2015, 121–22.

34 Blenkinsopp 2004, 121.

35 Cf. Mariottini 2022, 21; Halton 2021, 165.

36 Cf. Westermann 1985, 286–7.

37 Cf. Koltun-Fromm 2010, 43.

38 Cf. Becking 2009, 32.

39 Cf. Murphy 2008, 62.

40 Cf. Smith-Christopher 1994, 243–4.

41 Cf. Anderson 2002, 75.

fate. As Throntveit assumes, these unfortunate victims might have returned to the families of the divorced women.⁴² Yet, the proposed divorce and sending away, given the socio-religious contexts of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE in the Ancient Near East, would have affected the victims' prospects significantly.⁴³ In such contexts, Abraham's critical question regarding God's justice and his option for the righteous in Sodom,⁴⁴ as I perceive, was meant to challenge the Second Temple community and their dehumanising localisation tendencies, thereby defending the rights of innocent victims. Drawing insight from these trajectories, W. Brueggemann designates Abraham as Yahweh's theological teacher.⁴⁵ As Yahweh's teacher, Abraham's prophetic rage critiques the localisation perspectives of the Second Temple community.⁴⁶

These historical-critical insights on Abraham's prophetic rage against the notion of "local" as a "static identity" or "set position" are significant when related to Pottan Theyyam, which emerged amidst the dehumanising practices of the caste system.⁴⁷ For example, Pottan Theyyam builds upon an event when Pottan, a manifestation of Lord Shiva, walking along a narrow path, comes across Shankaracharya, a dominant caste scholar. Their conversation reaches its climax when Shankaracharya's attendant asks Pottan to give way to a dominant caste man. Pottan hesitates because he is holding his child with one arm and has a pot of toddy on his head. The thorns on the other side of the road also prevent him from giving way to the dominant caste traveller. Theophilus Appavoo translates Pottan's reaction:

What is that called a [Brahmin Woman]?
 What is that called an Outcaste?
 Is there any number marked
 On the skin, On the flesh?
 Or on the bones?
 Is there any difference
 Between [Brahmin women] and Outcaste
 During sexual intercourse?⁴⁸

42 Cf. Throntveit 2012, 56.

43 Cf. Saxegaard 2010, 46.

44 Cf. Hibbard 2019, 37.

45 Cf. Brueggemann 1982, 176.

46 Prophetic rage is a necessary response to the structural injustices of the world, rooted in the prophetic call for justice. Cf. Bernard Hill 2013, 2.

47 Cf. Skaria 2022, 59.

48 Appavoo 1986, 78. Minor editing done to make it more comprehensible. The original translation of Appavoo reads "Pennathi" for Brahmin women and "Parachchi" for outcaste women.

Pottan's questions are reasonable, philosophical and piercing. He criticises the social structure that legitimised and perpetuated the suffering of the dominated caste people in the local contexts, by asking reasonable questions regarding castes. He argues reasonably that both he and the dominant caste man may have diverse ways of doing things, but they are both human beings, the same red blood gushes out when a body is wounded, and both eat the same rice. Pottan reminds the dominant caste man that the lower caste community has been serving the dominant caste men by supplying them with fruit, leaves and flowers. Pottan claims further that the dominant caste people offer Tulsi⁴⁹ planted by his lower caste community to their deity. Pottan highlights the hypocrisy that relegates a dominant caste person as untouchable and unapproachable yet considers the fruit of their labour to be acceptable to the dominant caste gods. Pottan's philosophical approach to life and criticism against irrational religious practices, similar to the underlying questioning of the dehumanising consequences of certain Second Temple ideologies at the heart of the Abraham's arbitration narrative, includes a universalistic, interreligious, and cross-cultural ethic as their arguments break down gender, ethnic and religious boundaries.

3. Implications of the Proposed Paradigm in India

As noted, the meeting between divinity and humanity, as depicted respectively in Gen 18:22–33 and Pottan Theyyam, questions the dehumanising localisation tendencies in Yehud and India.⁵⁰ That similar ethical and social concerns emerge in the scriptures of two distinct geographic and cultural populations highlights a shared dimension of human nature and suggests the possibility of engaging with each other's texts to inform contextual theological reflection. This intersection highlights the fluidity of local identity and underscores the need to humanise humanity. Most importantly, they support a processual understanding of localisation, which demands a continuous delocalisation process, mutually enriching boundary crossings, and partnerships that transform local contexts, as possible tools for humanising humanity. Thus, putting both Abraham's arbitration narrative and Pottan Theyyam into dialogue with

49 Tulsi, commonly known in the western world as basil, is a perennial flowering plant from the Indian subcontinent. It is a highly revered plant in Hinduism. Pottan points out that the dominant caste men offer the Tulsi planted by the lower caste Dalits to the dominant caste deities.

50 While a sense of locality is vital for the identity of many people, such localisation can become exclusive and intolerant.

each other can further support attempts to humanise humanity living in the contemporary Indian context. For example, a large segment of Indian women has been confronting the negative impacts of stereotyping and discriminatory practices perpetuated through family dynamics, religious institutions, media portrayals, legal frameworks, cultural norms, educational structures, political systems and societal institutions.⁵¹ These norms have resulted in disparities in women's access to education, employment opportunities, political representation, and decision-making power in India.⁵² Most importantly, the issue of violence against women has garnered significant attention in recent years. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, the number of reported crimes against women in India has risen substantially over the past decade. In 2011, for example, the reported incidents numbered more than 228,650;⁵³ the figure surged to 428,278 in 2021,⁵⁴ representing an 87% increase. This disturbing trend calls for urgent attention and effective interventions to address the root causes of such violence and ensure the safety and well-being of women in our society.

Such a context underscores the urgency of the delocalisation process to combat gender inequality submerged in the Indian socio-cultural structures and to empower women, which is essential for developing a prosperous, peaceful, sustainable and inclusive society. Pottan's statement, "When your body or ours is wounded, it is the same blood that gushes out," though concerned with the negative impacts of the caste system upon humanity, can also suggest the universal nature of human suffering and the fundamental equality that exists in our shared humanity. This perspective can be used to demonstrate the potential for transcending boundaries and fostering inclusive practices to address gender inequality and promote a more equitable society within the Indian context. It emphasises the need for empathy and solidarity across gender lines, highlighting that our common experiences and vulnerabilities should unite us in the pursuit of gender equality and a fairer society for all. These insights demonstrate the potential for transcending boundaries and fostering inclusive practices that can contribute to addressing gender inequality and promoting a more equitable society within the Indian context.

51 Cf. Mathu and Jain 2008, 16–8.

52 Sheeja 163–169, Karhad and Karhad 2024, 71.

53 New Delhi: National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs. 2011. *Crime in India: Statistics*, 79.

54 Sravasti Dasgupta, "Crimes against women in India up 15% in 2021 as Delhi remains the most unsafe city." Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/crimes-against-women-ncrb-report-india-delhi-b2155640.html>. Accessed on 23 October 2024.

Conclusion

The prevailing Indian biblical methodologies, with their contextual and localisation perspectives, tend to overlook the differences based on casteist, linguistic and ethnic identities in India. Given this trajectory, I suggest dialogical hermeneutics, which emphasise and respect the Bible with its originating contexts, and Indian cultural resources with their originating contexts to redress the imbalance in Indian appropriation of the historical-critical methodology. To facilitate such a reading, this paper draws from the meeting between divinity and humanity narrated through the Abraham arbitration narrative and Pottan Theyyam. Such a study shows that these texts favour a processual understanding of localisation, in which the constant process of delocalisation and mutually enriching boundary crossing transforms contextual realities. Such a process will help Indians to overcome the differences based on casteist, linguistic and ethnic identities.

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Curse and Salvation in David and Shimei Narrative (2 Sam–1 Kings)

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Introduction

Curses are the absence of blessings in the Hebrew Bible. They contain powerful and active spoken words that cannot be annulled or changed unless with a blessing (cf. Judg 17:1–2). They are judgments against a person or a society pronounced by God (cf. Gen 8:21; 12:3) or a human against another human (cf. Exod 21:17; 22:27; Lev 19:14; 24:14) or society (cf. Josh 24:9). They can be harmful to the person who pronounces them, as well as the person to whom they are directed, because a curse is an act of violence against another. Alternatively, to offer a blessing is to offer salvation to others.

In addition, curse and shame are closely linked to each other, as blessing is linked to honour. In the three David and Shimei narratives (2 Sam 16:5–14; 19:17–24; 1 Kings 2:36–45), honour and shame play a major role in the lives of both characters. Both David and Shimei are dishonoured, and while Shimei chooses to dishonour David by cursing him, David also dishonours Shimei by his actions. However, there are opportunities for healing and salvation. Salvation is manifested when humans allow God to act and when there is a willingness to experience healing from brokenness. God's salvation frees people from all forms of violence. While David offers salvation when Shimei admits his wrongdoing, it is short-lived.

1. Methodology

There are two elements employed in reading a biblical text in this paper: understanding the message in its context (using biblical hermeneutics) and applying it in a new context (intercultural hermeneutics); hence, the text becomes alive in the new situation. The main question asked in intercultural hermeneutics is: What does the text mean to people in different cultures and perhaps also in different situations? In other words, what happens when “the text is engaged

by, and engages, its diverse readers"?¹ Intercultural hermeneutics invites us to leave our comfort zone and be inspired to interact with the text and its culture, then build a bridge of dialogue between the biblical text and the culture of the recipient.

2. Background

Over the centuries, in different societies and cultures, curses have been thought to affect individuals' lives. Sometimes curses are thought to affect an entire country. An extreme example is when difficulties faced by a country are interpreted as curses or as consequences for something the country has done in the past.² In addition, cursing expresses anger towards a group or an individual because of hatred, envy, jealousy or injustice. It can be a form of self-defence or a way to humiliate someone as a form of revenge.

Iraq has experienced dreadful times that have greatly impacted the lives of its people and the country as a whole on different levels. It is a rich country with an important oil sector; its oil reserves are among the largest in the world, which is a great blessing. But this blessing has turned into a curse. The country has suffered from dictatorship, colonial powers, and later, occupation forces, all of whom endeavoured to control its wealth. Over the years, the leaders' greed turned the country's blessings into a curse.

The people of Iraq have been suffering in different ways. Many years of war have led to insecurity, poor infrastructure and a lack of the necessities of life. In addition, the economic crisis led to high levels of unemployment and low levels of education, among other problems. Consequently, the frustration among the people is expressed in different ways, mostly negatively, in anger, and by cursing leaders and politicians. Under the dictatorship government in Iraq (from 1980 to 2003), cursing a leader or the government would lead to a harsh punishment. Then, with a change of government, people felt free to express their anger and resentment towards the regime. In such a situation, a curse can be a cry against violence and injustice. Cursing is sometimes a way to express a wish or a cry to God to take charge, or to withhold his blessings from others and impose justice.

¹ Wieland 2021, 103.

² The unsettled situation in Iraq was viewed by some people as an impact of the Jewish curse because the Iraqi government violently expelled the Jews living in Iraq, sending them away empty handed in the mid-twentieth century.

3. Curses in the Ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible

In the Ancient Near East, cursing is associated with the belief that spirits or gods are urged by the curser to take action against a person.³ Thus, a curse takes verbal and nonverbal forms and can also be expressed as a wish or petition to a deity.⁴ The oldest curses are found in Hittite treaties from 2500 BCE; every treaty ended with a curse and a blessing. The curse would fall on those who broke the treaty, and a blessing on those who honoured it.⁵ Scholars have also identified curse tables in Ancient Greek literature (6th to 1st century BCE), divided into five categories: “judicial, theatrical, commercial, love curses, and border-area curses.”⁶ It is agreed that the most common curses in this genre are judicial.

In the Hebrew Bible, the concept of blessing is salvation, which is “the ultimate goal in God’s redemptive plan;”⁷ while the concept of curse is connected to judgment, and, therefore, contradictory to the concept of blessing. There are twenty-seven types of curses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–32 alone which can be summarised into “six terms: defeat, disease, desolation, deprivation, deportation, and death. Such curses are warnings of what God will cause to happen to Israel if they sin.”⁸ Therefore, curses are often related to breaking the covenant with the Lord (cf. Deut 27–28 where the root *אָרַר* is used). There are also people who pronounce curses on individuals and nations (e.g. Num 22–24).

While in the Hebrew Bible, *בָּרַךְ* is the only root used to refer to a blessing, several different root verbs are used to define “curse”: *אָרַר*, *קָלַל*, *זָעַם*, *קָבַב*, *הָזִי*, and *אָלַה*.⁹ In the David and Shimei narrative, only words from the root *קָלַל* are used nine times (cf. 2 Sam 16:7, 9–10, 13; 19:22; 1 Kings 2:8). Often *קָלַל* is used in Hebrew Bible, when there are consequences; either the one who curses or the person being cursed is humiliated (e.g. Lev 24; 2 Sam 16:7; Neh 13:15). According to Scharbert, *קָלַל* “has a wide range of meanings, often dealing less

3 Stuart 1992, 1218.

4 Cf. Kitz 2007, 615–27.

5 Cf. Thompson 1963, 7–39.

6 Eidinow 2007, 154.

7 Sidorova 2015, 152–3.

8 Stuart 1992, 1218.

9 There are 40 occurrences of the root verb *קָלַל* in the Hebrew Bible: Gen 8:21; 12:3; Exod 21:17, 27; Lev 19:14; 20:9; 24:11, 14, 15, 23; Deut 23:5; Josh 24:9; Judg 9:27; 3:13; 17:43; Neh 13:2, 25; Job 3:1; Ps 37:22; 62:4; 109:28; Isa 8:21; 65:2; Jer 15:10; Eccl 7:21, 22; 10:22 x2; Prov 20:20; 30:10, 11. Twelve occurrences of *קָלַל* appear in 2 Sam: 16:5, 7, 9, 10 (2x), 11, 12 (noun), 13; 19:22; 1 Kgs 2:8 (2x noun and verb); 2 Kgs 2:24.

with imprecation than with disrespect and verbal or physical abuse.”¹⁰ Curses are not only wishes for misfortune, but they also carry the belief that “a power is released that is effective in determining the destiny of the recipient of the curse.”¹¹ Both curses and blessings increase in power when the name of the Lord is invoked.

There are often nonverbal actions that accompany a curse, such as screaming, pulling hair, or throwing stones and dirt (cf. Num 5:19–28; Jer 19:1–13). In addition, the Mosaic Law prohibited cursing God (Exod 22:28; Lev 24:10–16; Isa 8:21–22), parents and rulers (Exod 21:17; 22:28; 2 Sam 16:9; Eccl 10:20; Prov 20:20), and the disabled (the deaf in Lev 19:14) because of the dishonour that is involved in cursing.¹²

4. Textual Context

The David and Shimei narratives are found in 2 Sam 16:5–14; 19:17–24; 1 Kings 2:8–9; 2:36–45. An outline of these narratives shows that tension and hostility preceded Shimei’s appearance each time:

First scene: Revolt of Absalom (2 Sam 15)

Revolt of Shimei when meeting David (2 Sam 16:5–14)

Second scene: Quarrelling among the tribes of Israel after the revolt (2 Sam 19:10–16)

David and Shimei meet again (2 Sam 19:17–24)

Third scene: David’s command to Solomon about Shimei (1 Kings 2:8–9)

Death of Shimei (1 Kings 2:36–45)

The first reference to Shimei is in the context of Absalom’s revolt. It seems that “Absalom appears only to provide a context for David’s wrestling, both with faith and for the throne.”¹³ This scene begins with news reaching David that Absalom has won the hearts of the Israelites (2 Sam 15:1–13). David, realising the impact this would have on his kingdom, flees Jerusalem with his officials for two reasons: to avoid death and to protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem (15:13–14). Fleeing the city is described as a procession that begins with David climbing up the Mount of Olives, weeping with his head covered, and his

¹⁰ Scharbert 1974, 39. Cf. also Urbrock 753.

¹¹ Donkor 2011, 92.

¹² Cf. Evans 2000, 400.

¹³ Ridout 1971, 212.

people accompanying him. Acts like weeping, covering the head, and walking barefoot (15:30) are as “expressions of penitence”¹⁴, as well as signs of being ashamed. They weep for leaving their city; perhaps it felt like exile to them. One wonders what David thought of his situation. Did he think of it as punishment from the Lord, or did he accept the situation as another opposition to maintaining the kingship?

4.1 Shimei’s Revolt (2 Sam 16:5–15)

Upon approaching Bahurim, David and the army accompanying him are met by Shimei the Benjaminite, who is from the same tribe as Saul (cf. 1 Sam 10:21; 2 Sam 16:5). Shimei shows feelings of indignation and tension toward David, which is evident in 2 Sam 16:5–12.

4.1.1 Shimei’s Speech (2 Sam 16:7–8; 1 Kings 2:8)

Shimei, while on the side of a hill, violently curses David, throwing stones and dirt at the king and all those accompanying and surrounding him, saying: “Away, away, you murderous and wicked man. The LORD has requited you for all the bloodshed in the family of Saul, in whose stead you became king, and the LORD has given over the kingdom to your son Absalom. And now you suffer ruin because you are a murderer” (16:7–8). In the Middle East, throwing stones at or behind someone is an action expressing the wish that this person not return to the place again. This is exactly what Shimei is doing. Although Shimei directs his words to David, his action affects everyone. Shimei continues cursing and throwing stones and dirt at the group until they pass him (16:13). Shimei’s actions and words are a judgement against David.

While the narrator repeats twice that Shimei curses (קלל) the king (v.5, 13), Shimei does not use the word “curse” in his reported direct speech; there is no record that Shimei has actually uttered words of cursing. The verb root קלל in the *piel* form is used nine times in the David and Shimei narratives (2 Sam 16:5, 7, 9–13; 19:22 (21); 1 Kings 2:8), which can be understood “as ‘disparage, insult, belittle’ since the text does not describe Shimei as actually cursing David but as insulting him and throwing stones at him.”¹⁵ This changes in the later passage 1 Kings 2:8 where it occurs twice, which “requires us to interpret *qillel* in both contexts as ‘curse,’ because here David says to Solomon: qil^llanî q^llāla nimeršet

¹⁴ Cf. Anderson 2002, 205.

¹⁵ Scharbert 1974, 39.

‘He cursed me with a dangerous curse.’¹⁶ Moreover, Shimei’s words (1 Sam 16:7) are more an insult rather than a curse because his words do not follow any form of conditional (e.g. 1 Sam 3:17; 14:24–28), unconditional (e.g. 2 Sam 2:28–29), or simile curses that we see elsewhere in Hebrew Bible or in Ancient Near East.¹⁷ In addition, he does not invoke the name of the Lord. Shimei’s curse is not a wish that he would like to unfold in the future; it is a result of a current event.

Shimei’s curse contains three parts: he uses the imperative verb form by repeating the verb **אָצַק** twice in expelling David; he accuses the king of being murderous **הַדָּמִים** and a man of blood, specifically the blood of the house of Saul; he accuses David of being a wicked man **הַבְּלִיָּעַל**; and he elucidates the events as punishment from the Lord (2 Sam 16:10).

Shimei’s anger and bitterness against David can be explained as a result of all the murders of the royal family of Saul (both Shimei and Saul are Benjaminites) and of the loss of monarchs from the northern tribes. Indeed, Eric Anum speaks of “righteous anger” against injustice and oppression,¹⁸ to which Shimei alludes. But the problem with Shimei is that his anger is personal (self-centred), and the opportunity for revenge was at hand. Instead of dealing with anger to bring about change, Shimei’s anger led to his destruction. Shimei’s perspective on the event is different from David’s perspective. The feelings of injustice have embittered Shimei.

In addition, there is no doubt that Shimei’s action is of a “political nature” because the only connection between David and Shimei is a political one concerning the kingship in Israel.¹⁹ The biblical narrative tries to rationalise David’s actions. Although David did not kill any of Saul’s family members, this does not mean he was not responsible for other deaths, as narrated in 2 Sam 21:1–9 (cf. also 1 Sam 29–31; 2 Sam 2:31; 4:7). Thus, David is described as “a man responsible for bloodshed” (**אִישׁ הַדָּמִים**), rather than “killer, murderer” (**רָצַח**).²⁰ In addition, perhaps Shimei is afraid that David would seek to reside in his town, which would put the town in danger just as David would have put Jerusalem in danger. In some ways, Shimei’s actions express *Schadenfreude*²¹ when insulting David, as it is clear that Shimei enjoys seeing David harmed.

As a Benjaminite, Shimei is stirring up hostility against the rule of David. He is convinced that David deserves what is happening to him and that Absalom’s rebellion was a sign that God is taking action against David, which can be seen

16 *Ibid.* 39–40.

17 For types of curses, see Kitz 2007, 621–7.

18 Cf. Anum 2002, 230.

19 Cf. Anderson 2002, 202.

20 Anderson 2002, 206.

21 *Schadenfreude* means “Enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others.” “*Schadenfreude*.” Merriam-Webster.com. 2024. (19 August 2024).

as divine punishment or justice. For Shimei, just as David took Saul's place, so now Absalom is taking David's place. According to Shimei, the reason for what is happening to David is the fact that he is a murderer. This judgment is causing David to be separated from society. It is worthy of note that in the Arabic dictionary, the word "curse" means "deportation and expulsion from goodness ... and from God, and creation."²² This is precisely the impact of the perceived curse on David. The words accompanying Shimei's curse contain words expelling David from the place. Separation from a person's land is a common punishment for curses in the Hebrew Bible.²³ Two threats are employed in curses: "the threat of devastating calamity, and the threat of exclusion from the community."²⁴ The devastation in David's life was losing the throne and consequently leaving the land.

4.1.2 Abishai's Speech Directed to David (2 Sam 16:9)

Abishai, David's nephew and his military leader, reacts to Shimei's words. In an effort to save the king's honour, he wants to take action as an immediate response to Shimei's behaviour. Shimei's violence is met with the violence of Abishai as he is loyal to David, and justice needs to be taken for cursing the rulers (cf. Exod 22:28). In his turn, he calls Shimei a "dead dog" and suggests killing Shimei as a punishment. Moreover, S. H. Blank states that Abishai's suggestion to kill Shimei and later Solomon's order to kill Shimei (1 Kings 2: 46) is to annul the curse "by destroying its source, the man who uttered it."²⁵

The expression "dead dog" is often used to dishonour, insult, and humiliate someone, putting that person at "the lowest in the social scale,"²⁶ which is what Abishai is doing here. This expression "dead dog" is used earlier in 1 Sam 24:15 by David, and in 2 Sam 9:8 it is used by Meribbaal, son of Jonathan, about himself when speaking to David.

4.1.3 David's Speech (2 Sam 16:10–12)

David does not reply directly to Shimei; he speaks rather to Abishai. He does not claim to be innocent of Shimei's charges; neither does he justify Abishai.

²² Ibn Manzur 2003, 91.

²³ Signs of a curse in Hebrew Bible are death (e.g. Jer 38:2), exile (e.g. Lev 26:33), and famine (e.g. Deut 28:47–57).

²⁴ Anderson 1998, 227.

²⁵ Blank 1950, 93.

²⁶ Cf. Ryken and Wilhoit (eds.) 2000, 214.

David focuses on the important matter, hoping for a good thing to happen, for deliverance from his distress.

Shimei, in cursing and throwing stones at David and his company, is treating them as dogs. It should be noted that “dogs” in the Middle East are not treated as pets and are considered impure. Dogs are often used in Arabic proverbs to disgrace a person or a group.²⁷ They are expelled by throwing stones at them. But more often than not, people ignore them given that they are not worth their attention. Similarly, David does to Shimei what people in the Middle East do to their dogs when they bark; David ignores Shimei. David does not retaliate against Shimei, he does not answer him, thus humiliating him. Further, Abishai calls Shimei a “dog,” but David treats Shimei like a “dog.” To add to the insult, Abishai calls him a “dead dog,” alluding to his powerlessness.

The main feature identified in this so-called curse is the element of losing honour in a culture in which honour and shame play a significant role. David loses his honour when cursed, especially because his army is present. Also, Shimei shames David by yelling at him and throwing dirt. Equally, David puts Shimei to shame when he does not answer him. King David had already experienced shame with those who were with him (2 Sam 15:30). As mentioned above, these are signs of mourning as well as of shame. David is already burdened with the shame of losing his rule and his land, and now he must endure being shamed by a Benjaminite.

David directs his words to Abishai and addresses him in the plural form (1 Sam 16:10), “sons of Zeruiah,”²⁸ as if he represents his brother, just as Shimei represents his tribe or even the tribes of the north: “House of Joseph” (1 Sam 19:21). While David refuses Abishai’s suggestion in an earlier account (cf. 1 Sam 26:8–13), here he also refuses to take any action against Shimei. David surrenders his case to the Lord, from whom he expects salvation. Thus, the phrase “man of blood” (1 Sam 16:8), which Shimei used when addressing David, would really be more suitable in reference to Abishai, not David.²⁹ David appears as a “wisdom figure” here and as a “righteous man who leaves vengeance in the hands of the Lord and does not put forth his hand in violence.”³⁰ David accepts the curse as an atonement so that God may accept him.

27 Some Arabic proverbs about dogs: The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on. Every dog is a tiger on his own street. The clouds are not affected by the barking of dogs. When you mention ‘dog’, you should get a stick.

28 Sons of Zeruiah: David’s sister (2 Sam 17:25; 1 Chron 2:13); Abishai (1 Sam 26:5–12; 2 Sam 21:15–17; 23:18); Joab (2 Sam 3:27).

29 Cf. Schley 1992, 24.

30 *Ibid.*

While David does not justify Shimei's wrongdoing, he considers the possibility of a divine curse. David is open to the possibility that Shimei is a messenger from God, a prophet, and that his afflictions are from God. So, he submits himself to God: "Suppose the LORD has told him to curse David; who then will dare to say, 'Why are you doing this?'" (16:10); thus, David gives "authorial interpretation"³¹ to Shimei's curse. In addition, David considers Shimei's words and actions on the basis that, since his own son offended him, how can he blame the action of a Benjaminite?

David might be afraid that the curse would take effect if challenged. David knows well that killing Shimei would enrage the Saulides. He therefore refuses Abishai's suggestion, and instead hopes that this curse will turn into a blessing and salvation as God's reward. David's trust in the promise of the Lord plays a role in this narrative. The Lord's promise dominates the succession narrative (2 Sam 7) where "Yahweh's ultimate will for the dynasty finally overcomes all the resistance of the royal family."³²

The conditions are favourable for Shimei and he takes advantage of that; otherwise, Shimei would not have been able to curse David. He has the advantage of being in his land, which would be lost later in the time of Solomon. He also benefits from David's social and political situation to scold and curse David as a runaway. Nonetheless, Shimei is risking his life because David still has an army with him. Solomon shows a similar attitude toward Shimei, as Shimei now shows to David. Both Shimei and Solomon take advantage of their present circumstances (cf. 1 Kings 2:8–9; 36–46) and the present moment to seek revenge rather than show mercy.

There are important aspects in this narrative; the calamity is viewed as God's work twice (2 Sam 15:26; 16:10–11). It is divine retribution for the violence done to Saul, and any change to that calamity can only happen through God. David is able to accept the humiliation and move on; his focus is not Shimei but on how the present situation might bring him salvation.

To sum up, Shimei's curse is uttered after something has already happened, which is very different from pronouncing a curse that unfolds later in a person's life. Shimei's words carry no power as he does not invoke the name of the Lord in the curse. The events that David experiences lead Shimei to say that David is cursed because of his past actions. Shimei states that what happens to David is the result of his actions. Subsequently, David respects Shimei's words and is open to the possibility that the Lord is behind his words, accepting the events as a means for him to make atonement.

31 Cf. Polzin 1993, 221–2.

32 Brueggemann 1974, 181–2.

4.2 From Cursing to Welcoming (2 Sam 19:17–24)

God was faithful to his promise to David and delivered him from his enemy. David's army defeats Absalom who is killed. Consequently, the tribes of the north want to restore the king to Israel, but the tribes of the south do not take action. David sends after the elders of Judah to return him to the city as king.³³ In other words, he was not honoured by the people of Judah and was not asked to return to Jerusalem. When he does return to Jerusalem, he causes a division between the Israelites and the Judeans.³⁴

David is escorted by many people, and when crossing the Jordan River, he is met by the Judeans and Shimei. As Shimei welcomes the king, he asks him not to remember the wrong he did to him (19:20–21).³⁵ No reference is made to Shimei's previous action. Shimei appeared alone in the first scene (2 Sam 16), but perhaps he was representing his people and expressing the feelings of Saulides. In this present scene (2 Sam 19), he is accompanied by one thousand Benjaminite men, perhaps to intercede for him.

Abishai again states that Shimei should be killed because he cursed the anointed, and again, David refuses (2 Sam 19:22–23). Instead, he grants Shimei a promise: "You shall not die," giving him an oath (19:24). In the context of this verse, it seems that David forgives Shimei, but it is not possible to consider salvation to Shimei in David's words because later, David commands Solomon to punish Shimei. There are two political powers at work in the scene: David's reaction represents peacefulness with the Benjaminites, but Abishai, being faithful to the king and ready to punish, represents another political attitude.

While some passages suggest that curses can be reversed by blessing (cf. Exod 12:32; Judg 17:1–2; 2 Sam 21:1–3; Neh 13:2), Shimei does not reverse his curse. He welcomes David back, but he does not bless him. He welcomes David out of fear because he is the king and has power again. In fact, in this narrative, there are two broken people carrying the burden of their past, two people who were in danger of losing their lives. The only healing possible for them is forgiveness, which they both show a side of in their reaction upon meeting again in Gilgal when David returns and crosses the Jordan River.

33 David sent to Zadok and Abiathar the priests to speak to the elders of Judah. He even promises a position to Amasa in order to return the king (19:12–16).

34 The dispute between the northern tribes and Judah did not end with the death of Absalom and the return of David. The northern tribes follow Sheba, the Benjamite who rebelled against David and was later killed by his own people (2 Sam 20).

35 When David was leaving, he was met by Shimei and Ziba, and when returning, he was also met by the two (2 Sam 16:19). (2 Sam 16:19) While Ziba tries to satisfy the king, Shimei seizes the opportunity.

4.3 Death of Shimei (1 Kings 2:36–45)

On his deathbed, David admonishes Solomon to take multiple actions (1 Kings 2:1–12) which will prepare him to establish his kingdom (2:46). David advises Solomon to observe the law of Moses, and to deal with his enemies, giving the reasons for that: Joab for having killed two commanders of the armies of Israel, Abner and Amasa (2:1–6), and Shimei for having cursed the king (2:8–9). Finally, David advises Solomon to care for his friends, the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite (2:7) as they honoured David when he fled Jerusalem. Solomon puts David's words into action and does more through political repression, starting by killing his brother Adonijah: he expels Abiathar the priest, and kills Joab (2:26–35) and then Shimei (2:36–47).

While twice Abishai suggested killing Shimei, David did not allow him, but then David himself orders his son to kill Shimei in order to establish the kingdom. It seems that Shimei's curse had no effect on the descendant of David, and David is not afraid that the curse would pass on to his son. The power of the curse lies in the objective belief that the curse has power.³⁶ Shimei's curse led to his own destruction. According to 1 Kings 2, Shimei is killed because he violated Solomon's command and left Jerusalem when he was commanded not to. However, the reader knows that the reason is because he cursed the king; therefore, Shimei's death is the consequence of his cursing the king. David's honour is regained when Shimei is killed. By killing his enemies, Solomon is able to establish his kingdom. While the reader is disturbed by Solomon's action, the biblical authors were interested in showing how the promise was established (cf. 2 Sam 7).

Conclusion

Cursing is instrumental in the narratives of David and Shimei as it affects their lives. Shimei seizes the opportunity when meeting David; so he curses him, dishonouring him in the presence of his army. From Shimei's perspective, his reaction is a cry for injustice that includes violence. He obviously could not reconcile himself to the fact that the reign of Saul had ended, and the reign of David had begun. Conversely, David shows amnesty towards Shimei twice: in the first scene, when David is deprived of his kingship, and later when he is returning to Jerusalem as a king. Three times Shimei admits that he did wrong to the King (2 Sam 19:21–22) and by doing that, he honours the king. Shimei is

36 Cf. Boer 1961, 6–7.

given a promise that he will not die, but the promise is short-lived. Shimei's admission of guilt did not intercede fully for him. Ultimately, the curse leads to Shimei's death. The opportunity for salvation was at hand when King David pardoned Shimei, but unfortunately, it did not last, as the King ordered his son to eliminate Shimei later.

In the Middle East in general and specifically in Iraq, cursing is inherent in our society, especially against the leaders who are negligent in fulfilling their responsibilities towards their people. People call on God to act and to deliver them. Contrarily and out of anger, they ask God to take revenge on those who deprive them of their rights and shame them. People tend to pronounce a curse as a protest against injustice; they curse out of despair and as a last resort in the hope of moving the leaders to work, bringing well-being to people, and at the same time gaining their honour. However, acts of violence beget violence, as demonstrated in the David and Shimei narratives. Salvation is not possible by assaulting others or by taking matters into one's own hands. In situations of difficulties and frustrations, unity and solidarity are required to bring about salvation, especially in a country like Iraq, whose people are from different religions and denominations, but who all believe in one God who is able to deliver them.

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The House-Help System as Modern-Day Slavery: An Intercultural Reading of Isaiah 58:1–9 in the Context of Ghana

Emem Opoku-Agyemang

Introduction

Modern-day slavery is defined as the exploitation of an individual by others, for personal or commercial gain.¹ More than 27 million people, including children, still experience slavery or slave-like conditions, including domestic servitude or the ‘house-help’ system.²

The concept and practice of ‘house-help’ is a very sensitive topic in Ghana since it touches on traditional practices. Most Ghanaians would disagree with the notion that the ‘house-help’ system may be oppressive. Contentions also exist regarding the definition of modern slavery, especially when it comes into direct conflict with what has pertained in traditional circles.³ This means that most Ghanaians, including Christians, would not agree that the ‘house-help’ system or domestic servitude is a mode of modern slavery, and would cite traditional reasons to justify it.

This situation poses a hermeneutical challenge that this paper seeks to address. It is important to note that, irrespective of denomination or theological creed, the Bible holds a central place in the life of every Ghanaian Christian.⁴ Therefore, Scripture would be the basis for the transformation of the contemporary context. Hence, this paper offers an intercultural reading of Isa 58:1–9a to propose a biblical paradigm for social justice in this area. Furthermore, this essay proposes an in-depth understanding of the Ghanaian context to explore the extent to which the ‘house-help’ system is perceived as a form of modern-day slavery, and provides a guide toward transformation.

1 Cf. “What is Modern Slavery?” www.antislavery.org accessed: March 3, 2023.

2 Cf. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “The Human Faces of Modern Slavery,” 1.

3 Collins and Quartey 2022, 3.

4 Cf. Oduyoye 1986, 51; Mburu 2019, 3–5.

An intercultural approach is employed in the analysis of the text since it “offers a dialogue between cultural worlds; it is an engagement between the generative culture of the biblical text and the receiving culture.”⁵ Following the communicative approach,⁶ this paper is organised in three steps: 1) exegesis of the Ghanaian reality, 2) exegesis of Isa 58:1–9a, and 3) an engagement of the text and the Ghanaian reality. The aim is to challenge the cultural context in view of transformation, to ensure freedom for her people.

1. Exegesis of the Ghanaian Reality

The ‘house-help’ system, as it is popularly called in Ghana and other West African countries, is a system that gains from the labour of domestic workers. Domestic work is “work performed in or for the household or households, which is usually not regulated. Rather, the ‘house-helpers’ are at the mercy of the madam or sir of the household.”⁷

It is expedient to mention that domestic work is a growing economic sector. Even though regulation is absent, more people, especially women, are gaining employment in sectors that ensure their absence from their homes.⁸ Due to this factor, they ‘employ’ domestic workers, who are for the most part migrants from rural areas and poor homes, to work in their households. Some of them are city dwellers recruited by employment agencies. Their duties include, but are not limited to, house cleaning, cooking, caring for children, etc.

1.1 Traditional Ghanaian Society and the ‘House-Help’ System

The ‘house-help’ system is deeply rooted in the traditional society, which makes it difficult to delineate it as slavery. Welch avers that just like most systems of servitude in recent times, the ‘house-help’ system is very subtle and “deeply rooted in the society and is promulgated by existing norms.”⁹ The traditional practice of slavery is common in some African religions where females, preferably virgins, are dedicated to the gods to serve as votary maids until they reach the age of marriage.¹⁰ Another example of a traditional system of servitude

5 Gatti 2021, 257.

6 Cf. Ossom-Batsa 2014, 116–34.

7 Awumbila, Teye and Yaro 2017, 958.

8 Cf. Awumbila, Teye and Yaro 2017, 957.

9 Welch Jr. 2009, 72.

10 Cf. Encyclopaedia of Religion Online, s.v. “Gender and Religion: Gender and African Religious Traditions,” by Oyeronke Olajubu, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment>

is the *abaawa*¹¹ system, which is a form of modern-day slavery masquerading as domestic employment.¹² Akurang-Parry laments that this is a form of female slavery that “has been ostensibly projected as a benign apprenticeship and kin-based institution.”¹³ Interestingly, the *abaawa* system is a system of servitude that focuses on the female gender, which indicates that females are the most affected in any system of domestic slavery. The issue this presents is that these practices have been normalised and are accepted by the people. The question then is, how are these domestic workers recruited?

It is observed that the traditional society, especially the family, is central to the employment of ‘house-help’ in Ghana. Tsikata reports that recruitment arrangements are usually mediated informally within the community. Family members, neighbours and friends could be involved in connecting potential ‘house-helpers’ with employers.¹⁴ Unconsciously, households employ the services of these ‘house-helpers’ and various forms of domestic labour without thinking of the legal and social implications.

1.2 Legal and Social Implications of the ‘House-Help’ System

According to the Ghana Statistical Service, 65,167 (0.6%) of the Ghanaian population 15 years and above are domestic workers.¹⁵ It is expedient to mention that Section 175 of the Labour Act, 2003 (Act 651) defines a domestic worker as someone who is not a member of the household of a person who employs him or her as ‘house-help’.¹⁶ However, The Labour Regulation, 2020, L.1 2408 definition of domestic work includes security services, domestic chores performed by a person in any home or domestic setting, gardening, assistance with petty commercial activity and informal work performed by a domestic worker who also performs household chores in the home of an individual.¹⁷ The more recent regulation, as noted above, widens the scope of domestic work, thus expanding the possibility of exploitation since the worker has more duties and a larger workload to perform in a household.

ment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/gender-and-religion-gender-and-african-religious-traditions. Accessed, December 9, 2022.

11 The word in and of itself is neutral. It means a female preadolescent female in the Akan language.

12 Cf. Akurang-Parry 2010, 29.

13 Akurang-Parry 2009, 29.

14 Tsikata 2018, 11.

15 Cf. Ghana Statistical Service 2012, 88–90.

16 Cf. Integrated Legal Consultants 2020, 1.

17 Cf. Integrated Legal Consultants 2020, 2.

The regulation brings to bear the legal responsibilities of the ‘employer’, which they hardly abide by. This includes the necessity of a written contract, and that the employee be paid at least the national minimum wage, i.e. Now 21.77 cedi (US\$1.80) per day.¹⁸ In critiquing this regulation, Asamoah, Baah-Ennumh and Yeboah aver that, in reality, domestic workers (‘house-helpers’) are not paid according to the national minimum wage; nor are they given fixed wages or salaries.¹⁹ Clearly, the Law provides protection for these ‘house-helpers’, especially for children below 16 years, but people are either knowingly or unknowingly breaking the law, exposing these workers to all manner of abuse and maltreatment.

Furthermore, Blackette and Tsikata argue that this domestic work regulation is paradoxical since it depends on the master/mistress-servant relationship and is also “characterized by a high degree of labour market informality.”²⁰ Hence, the “house-helper’s” duties can range from caring for children to washing toilets. In other words, the duties are not specified and are many times demeaning and humiliating.

As hinted earlier, some of these ‘house-helpers’ are victims of domestic abuse, in breach of the Domestic Violence Act since domestic workers are covered by Act 732 of 2007, specifically, in section 2 (1) (h) where ‘house-help’ is listed.²¹ Unfortunately, ‘house-helpers’ seldom report cases of abuse to the authorities for fear of losing their jobs, and sometimes a roof over their head, because most of them live with their employers. Fortunately, there are exceptional cases where some ‘house-helpers’ are treated well and even assisted to learn a trade or complete their education.

In conclusion, as has been discussed that the ‘house-help’ system is deeply rooted in the traditional system, and is perpetuated and enabled by the family circle. These family members are either not aware of the laws protecting workers or they act as though the legal system has no jurisdiction in traditional Ghana. Hence, children and young adults, especially females, are subjected to domestic work and are paid little or nothing, which violates their basic human rights. This disturbing phenomenon interrogates the society, but also the Christian communities called to be the conscience of that society.

18 According to the communique issued by the National Tripartite Committee on the 2023 National Daily Minimum Wage, any establishment, institution or organisation that flouts this regulation shall be sanctioned in accordance with the law. In addition, there has been criticism of this new daily minimum wage because it is woefully inadequate considering the increase in cost of living, inflation and the depreciation of the cedi.

19 Cf. Adom-Asamoah, Baah-Ennumh and Yeboah 2016, 102.

20 Blackette and Tsikata 2022, 47.

21 Cf. Tsikata 2018, 9.

The biblical Scripture “invites us into a transformation of allegiances and commitment, which will manifest itself in behaviours appropriate to our social world.”²² The issue of slavery is one of injustice, which is a central topic in Trito-Isaiah who speaks of justice and righteousness as key values of Yahwism. Therefore, this paper will now offer an interpretation of Isa 58:1–9a to engage with the ‘house-help’ issue as a form of modern-day slavery in the context of Ghana. The motivation behind this is that there should be a response from the churches and the Christian community to ameliorate this disturbing phenomenon.

2. Exegesis of the Text

Isa 58:1–9a is found in the section of the book of Isaiah attributed to an anonymous author called ‘Third Isaiah,’ which rearticulates the core of Isaianic theology in the postexilic context.²³ Within the larger textual context of Isa 56–66, chapters 56–59 specifically focus on admonishing the postexilic Judahites on doing what is right and just in keeping with the covenant of YHWH so their obedience to YHWH’s precepts would be evident in their ethical and social practices. These concepts are central to the maintenance of equity in the community. Hence, godliness and righteousness now take a more communal form to the point that one could say that the keyword in Isaiah 58 is “community.”

2.1 An Overview of the Text

An overview of the text shows a “wondrous artistry.”²⁴ The words of YHWH presented in human utterance by the prophet evidence a “high poetic style” characteristic of Deutero and Trito-Isaiah.²⁵ Both Brueggemann and Oswalt consider Isa 58:1–14 to be a single textual unit that speaks of the true nature of Yahwism that must have a bearing on human relationships.²⁶ I, however, choose to delineate vv.1–9a as a distinct textual unit based on a single theme since it includes an entire literary cycle that begins with the identified problem with regard to the religious community and ends with a solution of blessing

22 Gatti 2021, 259.

23 Cf. Mastnjak 2020, 49; Brueggemann 1998, 196.

24 Brueggemann 1998, 14.

25 Motyer 1993, 48.

26 Cf. Oswalt 1998, 426; Brueggemann 1998, 220–8.

from YHWH. Subsequent verses are a repetition or recapitulation of vv.1–9a. I therefore, propose the following structure:

- A. Prophetic Commission and Divine Summons (58:1–2).
In vv.1–2, YHWH commissions the prophet to speak to the people of Judah and draw attention to their failures.
- B. Community's Selfish Interest (3–5).
Progressing to build a case against them, vv.3–4 exposes the people's selfish interest and wickedness against one another.
- C. True Religion (6–7).
YHWH proposes the tenets for true religion to proffer a solution to the moral decadence in vv.5–7.
- D. Blessings from Yahweh (8–9a).
The textual unit ends in vv.8–9a with divine promises of blessings that will come as a result of obedience.

2.2 Prophetic Commission and Divine Summons (58:1–2)

The prophet is commanded “to proclaim with the throat,” which indicates the extreme extent of the shout and the seriousness attached to it. This emphasis is made clear by the subsequent “raise your voice like the *shofar*”²⁷ to indicate the loudness of the voice. He was then commanded to “declare to my people their transgressions and to the house of Jacob their sins”²⁸ to emphasise the severity of the offence.

The alleged transgressors and sinners mentioned above seem to be religious people because they seek YHWH day by day and delight in knowing his ways. However, their hypocrisy is revealed by the syntagm **אֲשֶׁר-צִדְקָה עָשָׂה** (as a nation that did righteousness) followed by the “disjunctive *waw* translated ‘yet’ that opens the verse to underline the contrast between the content of this sentence and the previous one.”²⁹ The effect is to highlight their lip-service religiosity. The sole aim of their worship is to make demands, to ask for God's righteous judgments, which is ironic because in reality they have forsaken the judgment of God.

²⁷ The *shofar* was made of ram's horn (Josh 6:4).

²⁸ **פְּשָׁע** (Transgression) is usually rendered in connection with **חַטָּאת** (sin; Gen 31:36; Lev 16:16; 1 Kgs 8:50). Motyer defines **חַטָּאת** as actual or specific shortcomings.

²⁹ Oswalt 1998, 427.

2.3 The Community's Selfish Interest (vv.3–5)

In v.3, the community's selfish interest is exacerbated by their abuse of fasting, which Brueggemann terms "fraudulent liturgy."³⁰ Fasting was occasionally proclaimed on a national scale (cf. Lev 16:29; 23:29; Acts 27:9). In general, however, fasting was recognised as a way to seek divine favour and protection (cf. 2 Sam 12:22; Neh 1:4). Isaiah puts words on the mouths of the religious community of Judah who fast and afflict their souls, yet YHWH did not see or respond to their acts of piety because on the day of their fast they "find pleasure" and "oppress" their workers. This first indictment against the religious community of Israel is introduced with הִנֵּה (Behold!), alerting the reader to the urgency of the issue. Interestingly, the people delighted or found pleasure on the day of their fast despite the claim that they "afflicted their souls," thus indicating that their fasting, which should be a serious act of faith, was a mere calculation.

The second indictment found in v.4 is that during their fast, they engaged in strife and contention even to the extent of striking one another with a "wicked fist." Exod 21:18 uses this phrase "striking with a (wicked) fist" in a regulation that was meant to protect victims of physical assault. This begs the question, how can the Judahites act in violation of the Torah and still expect a response to their act of faith? The verdict is given in v.4b where such a distortion of worship cannot grant access to God since the motive is to manipulate him.³¹ In addition, the prophet's use of כִּי־הַיּוֹם (like this day or today) suggests that the people were fasting when the rebuke from YHWH came.

Further criticism is provided in v.5 of the people's "religious show" characterised by afflicting themselves, bending their head like a bulrush, and spreading out sackcloth and ashes, which typically were done in contexts of true worship of YHWH (cf. Gen 24:48; Exod 4:31; Neh 8:6). However, spreading out sackcloth and ashes was particularly an act of grief (cf. Jonah 3:5–8; Lam 2:10), a sign of repentance (cf. Job 42:6) or a show of remorse (cf. Neh 9:1; 1 Kings 21:27). Consequently, all these acts were rejected by YHWH because of the hypocritical attitude of the people.

2.4 True Religion (vv.6–7).

To be seen and heard by YHWH, the religious community must engage in the type of fast YHWH has chosen, which is not mere self-denial but is

³⁰ Brueggemann 1998, 221.

³¹ Brueggemann 1998, 223.

accompanied by acts of justice.³² The acceptable fast is a day of freedom on which מִשְׁפָּט (justice) and צְדִיקָה (righteousness), values that characterise this postexilic new era, are demonstrated.³³ These terms justice and righteousness had been a conventional pair in Israel's prophetic faith from the outset (cf. 2 Sam 8:15; Amos 6:12; Isa 56:1).³⁴ Together, the two terms bespeak a radical Torah obligation to order the community of covenant to bind in mutuality the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, to assure every member of the community's security, dignity and well-being.³⁵ Justice and righteousness were not just philosophical abstracts for the Israelite, but were essentially theological;³⁶ as divine attributes, they characterise any earthly rule sanctioned by God (cf. Ps 89:14). Therefore, genuine religion is incumbent on the total freedom of all YHWH's children.

The Trito-Isaiah uses an artistic presentation of phrases that depict freedom and justice:

1. פָּתַח תְּרִצְבוֹת רָשָׁע – “loosing the bonds of wickedness.”
2. הִתֵּר אֲגָדוֹת מוֹטָה – “loosing the bands of the yoke.”
3. וְשִׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפָשִׁים – “letting the oppressed go free.”
4. וְכָל-מוֹטָה תִּגְתְּקוּ – “breaking every yoke.”

Brueggemann argues that these acts anticipate the allusion to the practice of Jubilee in Isa 61:1–4 and are complemented by specific acts mentioned in v.7:³⁷

1. Sharing food with the hungry.
2. Giving shelter to the poor and homeless.
3. Clothing the naked.

Maslow lists food, shelter and clothing as basic physiological human needs.³⁸ Therefore, YHWH's concern is that all his children might live in a community where the most basic provisions for survival are provided. This appeal for social ethics and justice is what YHWH deems a true and genuine fast; acts that are an indication of the true worship of YHWH. After all, this is reminiscent of the deliverance and redemption of Israel from Egyptian captivity – that they might worship YHWH in freedom (cf. Exod 5:1; 8:1; 9:1).

32 Cf. Brueggemann 1998, 224.

33 Cf. Gatti and Ossom-Batsa 2018, 128.

34 Cf. Brueggemann 1998, 201.

35 Cf. Brueggemann 1998, 201.

36 Cf. Wright 2004, 254.

37 Cf. Brueggemann 1998, 224.

38 Cf. Aruma and Hanachor 2017, 17.

2.5 Blessings from Yahweh (vv.8–9a)

Introduced with “then,” the blessings of vv.8–9a are dependent on the people’s obedience of the commands in vv.6 and 7. The first “then” of v.8 anticipates immense well-being, here identified as “light,” healing, justice, protection and safety.³⁹ Their light (אִיֹר) will break forth, rip open or tear (בִּקֵּעַ) like the dawn, suggestive of something that happens suddenly.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Third Isaiah uses light to describe the presence and glory of God upon Jerusalem (cf. Isa 60:1). Nations will be attracted to that light (60:3). Consequently, it is this light of God’s presence that will dispel suffering (60:20).

The second blessing states that their healing, restoration (וְאִרְכָּתֶךָ), will spring out quickly; then their judgment, justice (צִדִּיקְךָ), will go before them as a result that they act in righteous judgment toward the marginalised and oppressed. Lastly, the glory from YHWH (כְּבוֹד) will be given to the religious community to protect them on every side.

Verse 9a is a summation of the blessings from YHWH in response to the initial complaint of YHWH not “seeing” or “responding” to them. Now the Lord will answer them. Better still, he will be present with them. Emphatically, he will say הִנְנִי (lit. Behold me!, Here I am!), which is the response of a waiting servant (cf. Gen 22:1; 1 Sam 3:4ff.).⁴¹ That is to say that YHWH will become a servant to those who have set their slaves and the oppressed free.

In conclusion, the text presents a stern criticism of Judah’s religious institution, community life and, most specifically, worship. The author uses “fast” symbolically to represent all other modes and forms of worship. The fast acceptable to YHWH, therefore, represents the ethical/moral and religious behaviour he approves and sanctions, creating a correlation between the religious life of God’s people and their actions in the community. The question now is, are Ghanaian Christians engaging in the “fast” acceptable to YHWH? Are we cognisant of YHWH’s choice and preference?

3. Engagement

The above exegetical analysis has demonstrated that Christian worshipers should eschew all forms of oppression in keeping with YHWH’s demands of justice and righteousness, which correlates with the theology of Trito-Isaiah.

39 Cf. Brueggemann 1998, 225.

40 Cf. Motyer 1993, 725.

41 Cf. Motyer 1993, 725.

These virtues are to be evident in the community where the Christians are called to serve YHWH's interest and not theirs.

Based on the above analysis, the perlocutionary effect of the studied text is to challenge every cultural system that oppresses humans. The text, therefore, challenges the Ghanaian Christian community to reject all forms of oppression and injustice especially against the poor and the marginalised. Ghanaians are admonished to engage in and promote true worship of YHWH that is incumbent upon righteousness and justice. As a result of their obedience, YHWH will favour them with his glory, presence, protection and safety, among other blessings.

Irrespective of denominational differences, Ghanaians are very religious and do not compromise their spirituality. The question is how can this spirituality translate into moral and ethical behaviour? Ghanaian Christians must grow in the awareness that there is a "gap" between worship and life. Christians are hereby called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth (cf. Matt 5:13–16). This responsibility goes beyond the "four walls" of the church into the larger society. Ghanaian Christians must understand that there is a connection between salvation and liberation. Hence, as Gutierrez postulates, "the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, and all alienation."⁴² Salvation as liberation is not just other-worldly. It must translate into the lived experience of the people.

Christian communities are called to promote social justice, to break the silence on the 'house-help' phenomenon, and to educate themselves and the society at large regarding the fact that the "worship" of God includes respecting and promoting the "image of God," present in the 'other.' YHWH himself has made his choice of worship, which includes justice for the oppressed, explicit. The Ghanaian Christian community is thus challenged to live by this. In the same vein, the mission of Jesus Christ as recorded in Luke 4:16–19 (cf. Isa 61:1–2) is "to bring good news to the poor," "to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind," "to let the oppressed go free," and "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Nwadiolor and Nweke posit that the above message of Christ is pivotal for African liberation theology.⁴³

In light of these commands, slavery, symbolised by the yoke and band, must be broken. Even though the daily minimum wage of 21.77 cedi (US\$1.80) is woefully inadequate, domestic workers must be paid at least what they are due. They must also work under favourable and agreed terms and conditions as stipulated by the Labour law. Acceptable worship, therefore, is consonant

42 Gutierrez 2001, 197.

43 Cf. Nwadiolor and Nweke 2013, 84.

with dismantling every oppressive system, like the 'house-help' system, so that all God's children might live in freedom.

Isa 58:8–9a follows the format of the Deuteronomic Code (cf. Deut 28 and 29), which enunciates that obedience to YHWH's precepts attracts blessings. Therefore, the Ghanaian Christian community is called to obedience that will lead to YHWH's blessings. Ghanaian Christians are challenged to a biblical understanding of blessing that Trito-Isaiah postulates, which is first of all the light of God. It is this light and presence of God that will dispel all manner of suffering and bring the health that is much desired and prayed for, especially by Ghanaian Christians.⁴⁴ Vindication is another important blessing attached to the light and presence of God.

All of the above blessings will come as a result of obedience to YHWH's precepts, which are loosing the bonds and bands of oppression, and dismantling the system of modern slavery and the 'house-help' system. Obedience implies that YHWH himself will become then their "servant-in-waiting." When we cry for help, he will then say, "Here I am!"

Conclusion

Based on the literature reviewed for this paper, the reality indicates that the unregulated 'house-help' system is strongly supported by traditional Ghanaian society. Therefore, domestic workers or 'house-helpers' are very likely to be exploited and abused. In direct contrast, the literary analysis of Isa 58:1–9a also shows that YHWH is critical of any system that perpetuates and encourages injustice and oppression. In other words, true worship of YHWH implies that injustice and oppression must be expunged.

The Ghanaian Christian community is, therefore, admonished to call out any system that perpetuates or enables the ill-treatment of God's children. We must ensure that the 'house-help' system is regulated per the laws of Ghana. Therefore, those employed in the 'house-help' system must be paid what they are legally due, and must be treated righteously and justly as the "image of God."

44 Cf. Omenyo and Atiemo 2006, 63.

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Rethinking Sin and Salvation in Ghanaian Christianity: Contextualising Selected Prophetic Oracles on Salvation

Kojo Okyere

Introduction

When European missionaries introduced Christianity into Sub-Saharan Africa, it was only a matter of time before African Christianity developed its own voice. Arguably, African biblical hermeneutics (ABH) has played a key role in helping African Christians “relate the gospel to African life and thought.”¹ This has been achieved by highlighting the meaningfulness of the Bible through an emphasis on the interpretive community. As Justin Ukpong indicates, the Bible and the African context encounter each other in a dialogue.² The encounter is not only about dialogical exchanges; it is also about praxeological possibilities. Gerald West posits that African biblical hermeneutics is inherently tri-polar because of the entangling elements of text, context, and appropriation: “Interpreting the biblical text is never, in ABH, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context.”³

How true is this claim for Ghanaian Christians in their understanding of salvation? With the majority of Ghanaians living in penury, with high youth unemployment, and poor standards of living, few would doubt that life in Ghana is despairing. Living conditions in Ghana are dire, and a crisis is slowly brewing, one that, if ignored for long, may escalate into chaos. Described as religious, ordinary Ghanaians usually explain their experiences through the matrix of religion. Contemporary scholarship notes that many Ghanaians, particularly within Christian communities, employ a distinctive hermeneutic that integrates soteriological frameworks with socioeconomic well-being. This interpretive paradigm manifests in how believers conceptualise both existential challenges and their potential resolutions, effectively collapsing the sacred/secular binary through a theological lens that imbues material

1 Edusa Eyison 2005, 95.

2 Cf. Ukpong 2000, 11.

3 West 2016, 44.

conditions with spiritual significance.⁴ But how useful is this understanding of salvation in eliciting the needed transformation they seek?

This paper argues that the prevailing soteriological framework within Ghanaian Christianity remains deficient in its capacity to generate substantive sociotheological transformation. By critically re-examining both the conceptual parameters and practical implications of salvation theology, this study contends that Ghanaian Christians must engage more robustly with contextual realities to develop a theologically coherent and pragmatically effective soteriology capable of addressing contemporary existential challenges. Such a reconceptualisation necessitates moving beyond doctrinal abstraction toward an embodied soteriological praxis that meaningfully responds to Ghana's sociocultural, economic, and ecological exigencies.

1. Hermeneutical Considerations: Tri-Polar Exegetical Model

Several models have been developed by African scholars as a response to the need for the constructive use of the Bible in peoples' lives. Of these, the tri-polar model as proposed by Jonathan Draper has gained considerable acceptance. This model will provide the framework for the hermeneutical direction of this paper.⁵ Mindful of his Apartheid context in South Africa, Draper resolved that a reader's context should occupy a prominent place in the reading process. Although not novel, this hermeneutical position is foundational to Draper as he questioned the neutrality of the reading process as advocated by some Western scholars.⁶ For Draper, our encounter with the text can be likened to human communication.⁷ The field, tenor and mode of communication usher in dynamic creativity in the creation of meaning. As communication aims at promoting constructive interaction so should our encounter with the Bible lead to constructive theologies.

4 Cf. Meyer 1998, 145–68; Gifford 2004, 87–112; Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 73–95.

5 Jonathan Draper's tripolar hermeneutics interprets biblical texts through three lenses: Distanciation (historical, cultural setting), Contextualisation (reader's sociohistorical location) Appropriation (practical implications for community). This framework bridges ancient text, modern reader, and transformative action, emphasising dynamic, contextually engaged biblical interpretation. Cf. Draper 2001, 148–68.

6 For instance, Hirsch argues for authorial intent as the fixed criterion for textual meaning, a position Draper challenges by emphasising the reader's contextual agency. Cf. Hirsch 1967, 8–12. Draper also challenges the position of Gadamer's universalist hermeneutics as insufficient in addressing power imbalances in interpretation. Cf. Gadamer 2004, 301–2.

7 Cf. Draper 2001, 149–51.

The tri-polar model has three poles: distanciation, contextualisation and appropriation. Distanciation is the process in which readers allow “the text to speak for itself by creating space or critical distance between themselves and the text.”⁸ This enables readers to perceive the world that the text proposes and prevents them from invading the text with their own presuppositions and biases.⁹ The next pole, contextualisation, focuses on the reader’s context. Readers need to understand who they are and the questions they bring to the text. The last pole, appropriation, invites readers to reflect on the communication that has taken place within the earlier poles in order to decide on the implications of the text for their context. As a religious text, the Bible functions normatively to provide theological and ethical frameworks to guide Christian communities in their ongoing discernment of divine will and purpose. This normative quality facilitates both continuity of tradition and adaptive application to contemporary communal life.¹⁰

2. Distanciation: Insights Into the Salvation Oracles of Hosea and Isaiah¹¹

Hosea and Isaiah belong to the group of the writing prophets who emerged in ancient Israel in the 8th century BCE. While Hosea prophesied in the northern kingdom, Isaiah, his younger contemporary, worked in the south (i.e. Isaiah of Jerusalem). The name Hosea means “he has helped,” while Isaiah means “Lord saves.” Considered a pivotal era in the history of both Israel and Judah, the 8th century represents the most appropriate setting for the books (except for Isa 40–66).¹² In the first half of the century, both nations attained tremendous heights economically and politically. However, there were religious, moral, and political intrigues that necessitated the outcries of the two prophets. To appreciate their message of salvation, I propose a dyadic structure of their oracles: the sins and judgment of the nations and God’s salvation. A purposeful selection of segments of their books will be used to illustrate their message.

8 Draper 2001, 156.

9 West 1993, 20.

10 Tanner 1997, 78–82.

11 Biblical references are based on the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise stated.

12 Cf. Bullock 1986, 39.

2.1 The Sins and Judgment of the Nations Israel and Judah

For Hosea, two reasons explain God's indignation against the Israelites and his subsequent judgment: religious and social crimes. Regarding the former, Hosea believed that Israel was special because of her privileged position (13:4–5); however, she has failed woefully by rejecting Yahweh. Hosea uses the marriage metaphor to depict the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. In characterising the unfaithfulness of his people, he declares in 4:12 “a spirit of whoredom” (רוֹחַ זְנוּנִים) has possessed the people leading them astray, whoring after other “suitors.” Hosea is not referring to promiscuity as known today. Rather, he was referring to cult prostitution, a Canaanite religious practice that placed sexuality at the centre of the cult.¹³ Many Israelites may have warmed up towards this religious practice either by opting for the Canaanite cult, or by modelling the worship of Yahweh after it.¹⁴

Regarding the latter, Hosea was appalled by the violence that encapsulated the Israelite society. The judgment suit in 4:2–3 makes this message succinct. A string of infinitives in v.2a (“swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out” אֵלֶּה זְכוּת וְרָצַח וְגִבּוֹל וְנָאֵף) reveals not only the degree of depravity, but also the different ways the people were committing violence in society. The infinitives in v.2a give way to the use of *qal* perfect verbs in v.2b to describe the readiness (פָּרְצוּ) and continuity (נִגְעוּ) in which violence is meted out. Together, the verse communicates the harm people were inflicting on others. A society filled with violence will reap the consequences. Thus in v.3, the land “mourns” (תִּאֲבֵל), the people in it “languish” (וְאִמָּל), and the natural world suffers also. Hosea makes it abundantly clear that the leaders of the day are to be blamed for the failures of the society (4:4, 9; 5:1). While the religious leaders failed to teach what is right (4:6 – נִדְמוּ עָמִי מִבְּלִי הִדְעַת – “my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge”), political leaders, consumed with greed for power, were igniting flames of destruction and setting society into a constant round of bloodshed (1:4–5; 4:2).

Right from the birth of his first child, Hosea sensed danger ahead for Israel. Many Israelites held the belief that Yahweh was indeed angry and was poised to punish them; however, they were optimistic, since they could not perceive that Yahweh would completely destroy them (cf. 6:1–3). Hosea held the contrary view: the judgment to come would be terrifying and devastating, and would also be inflicted upon the people by Yahweh. Rhetoric such as – אֲנִי אֶטְרֶף – “I myself will tear and go away” (5:14) and אֶפְגָּשָׁם כְּדָב שְׂכוּל – “I will fall

¹³ Cf. Wolff 1974, 14.

¹⁴ Cf. Miller 1987, 82.

upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs" (13:8) – shows God's direct agency in the impending disaster. In the penultimate chapter (13) that details God's judgment, four collections of sayings (13:1–5, 6–8, 9–11, 12–16) reveal God's chilling intent. The charges against Israel are laid before her: first she made a graven image and worshipped it (v.2); then she forgot God's saving grace (v.6); she falsely trusted in the monarchy and its kings (vv.10–11); and lastly, Ephraim is full of sin and guilt (v.12). Therefore, Israel will be reduced to nothing when the disaster strikes (v.16).

On his part, Isaiah depicts the religious sins of his people (cf. 2:8). Judeans abandoned their God and created an idol for themselves. They worship their own creation and in essence have devised their own laws. Through their relationship with Yahweh, they received the laws, which teach them the right that should be done and the wrong to be avoided. But with their own created religion, they have abandoned God's law and have generated their own laws that emanate from their depraved personalities (10:1–2). Barton argues that pride may be an overarching theme that sums up the sins of the people: "The essential sin of all the people Isaiah condemns is that they are getting above themselves."¹⁵ But could it be that the people have forgotten who they are? For Isaiah, sin pervades the land also because the people lack understanding, they do not know (יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַע עַמִּי לֹא הִתְבּוֹנֶן – 1:3).

Isaiah also elaborates on the moral decadence of his time. Descriptions of unethical conduct are scattered throughout the book. These include the oppression of widows and orphans (1:17; 3:14), theft and murder (1:21), injustice in the legal system (3:9; 5:23), expropriation of land belonging to the poor (5:8–10), and excessive display of opulence (3:16–4:1; 22:15–19).¹⁶ Indeed, the book opens with a rebuke of the people, and lists their crimes of injustice, oppression, and lack of sympathy (1:2–4, 16–17, 21–23). As Isaiah comes to terms with his own uncleanness (6:5), so he realises that the nation has been engulfed in uncleanness and pollution, particularly at the level of leadership. An increase in wealth and prosperity produced a people full of greed and the loss of respect for their fellow humans (3:5). Further insights into the realities of Isaiah's society are presented in a series of woe sayings in 5:8–24. Within a funeral setting, the sayings describe present and past realities where the leadership of the society is the main actor in the crimes listed. For instance, they are accused of adding house to house and field to field (5:8). With the greed

¹⁵ Barton 1995, 49.

¹⁶ Cf. Barton 1995, 46.

of amassing wealth, the elite create a “class of landless unemployed without home, livelihood, or civil rights.”¹⁷

Isaiah believes there is a divine plan (14:27) in response to the sins of the people. He bears the conviction that Yahweh is carrying out his “plan” (28:21) and that Yahweh has made a “decision.” What then is this plan and decision of Yahweh? Isaiah believes that Judah would be invaded and destroyed; both the cities and the countryside would be a waste (6:11–13). Assyria, as Isaiah would come to know, is God’s instrument for punishing the people. Judah’s punishment, thus, is not arbitrary. However, the Assyrians themselves will be defeated (10:5–34); Jerusalem will be spared with a remnant (37:32); there will eventually be a miracle of repentance and renewal (4:2–6); and finally, a New Jerusalem will rise out of the old, this time faithful and upright (26:1–21).

2.2 God’s Salvation for Israel and Judah

In Hosea, oracles of salvation are juxtaposed with oracles of judgment in a way that suggests God’s unfailing love despite his will to punish the people. It is noteworthy that the book ends with a message of hope in chapter 14. The chapter begins with the imperative “return” (שׁוּבָה), signalling a new beginning for Israel. Israel is urged to return to her God, an action that signifies her change of heart, thus leading to a confession (v.2). In her confession, Israel should first acknowledge her guilt and ask God to lift it away (כָּל־חַטָּאתָּא עָזֹר). She should also deny trust in herself and other nations as she reconciles with God. When Israel takes these steps, God will then initiate his healing process for Israel (vv.4–7). Like the dew, the Lord will nourish the Israelites, enabling them to flourish like the lily, the olive, and the fragrant gardens of Lebanon.¹⁸ Salvation as an abundant life, edged in the steadfast love of God, is promised to Israel.

As his name indicates, the theme of salvation is reflected throughout Isaiah’s prophecies. I consider, however, 11:1–16, where Isaiah focuses on the rule of a righteous king. The text can be divided into two parts: vv.1–9 (announcement of royal saviour) and vv.10–16 (announcement of salvation). The first, the announcement of a royal saviour, is a beautiful poem that proclaims the emergence from the Davidic family of a ruler endowed with charismatic attributes to fulfil the demands of a just and ordered society. Verse 1 announces the ruler, v.2 describes the characteristics of the ruler, vv.3–5 tell of what he will do, and vv.6–9 detail the outcome of his rule. The ruler comes from a lowly background; he is from a *shoot* (חֹטֶר) of a *stump* (גִּזְרִי), in contrast to the proud Assyrian king.

17 Watts 2002, 60.

18 Limburg 1988, 52.

The new ruler will be filled with the spirit of Yahweh. This unction will shape the king's character because he has been endowed with attributes such as "wisdom" (חֵכְמָה), "might" (גְּבוּרָה) and "fear of the Lord" (וִירְאָת יְהוָה). For Isaiah, the ultimate goal of a king is to establish a just society; therefore, the ruler will do exactly that since "his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord" (v.3). He will judge with fairness, ensuring the poor and the marginalised are not trampled upon (vv.3–4). Ultimately, his rule will usher in a paradise-like society, where chaos and tension, exemplified in predators chasing their prey, is replaced with peace and calmness with natural enemies living together (vv.6–9).

The second announcement of salvation begins with a parenthetical remark (v.10), then speaks of the gathering of the remnant (vv.11–12), the relationship between Judah and Israel (vv.13–14), and ends with God's actions (vv.15–16). The entire pericope is controlled by the clause "in that day" (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא), which signals God's readiness to intervene. Also important is the expression, "yet a second time" (v.11), an indication of past failure and a hint of another opportunity for the people to receive God's salvation. This time it is not the entirety of God's people, but a remnant; and although they are scattered across the world, they would be assembled as one. God's saving act goes beyond the scope of his people Israel to include the other nations as they rally around his ordained ruler (v.10). Salvation is not only realised in the return and unity of the remnant, but also in the tranquillity and communal sense of purpose that will characterise the relationship between Israel and Judah. God will reinforce this newfound relationship among his people when he completely removes all barriers and obstacles they may face (vv.15–16).

3. Contextualisation: Ghanaian Christian Communities and Salvation

The seed of Christianity planted, in Ghana in the 15th century CE, has since germinated and grown into a huge tree with many branches. A classification of Christian traditions in Ghana usually follows this pattern: mainline churches, which are missionary planted churches; African Indigenous Churches (AICs); Pentecostals; and the Charismatic and Prophetic churches.¹⁹ Although these Christian denominations use the Bible as the basis for their doctrines, it is interesting to note that their concept of salvation takes on different shapes and colours. Two frameworks shape the concept in Ghanaian Christianity. First, some churches continue to considerably hold onto the notion of salvation

19 Cf. Foli 2013, 2–3.

as promulgated by the missionaries; and second, there are those who wrestle with the concept of salvation from their African context. These two interpretations are examined below.

Salvation in the mainline churches is a derivative of the Western churches that planted the faith in Ghana. It is personal and “packaged” as the redemption of the soul. Centred on the life of Christ, salvation is the surrender of one’s life to Christ the saviour. Salvation in this sense manifested itself in several ways. It began with the missionaries who preached that salvation required the conversion of African indigenes into this new faith, which required them to abandon the “old life” and accept this “new life” in Christ. This was the phase of African Christianity in which the people struggled to understand their new faith and its cultural demands. As the churches gained root, the message of salvation did not change much. Although the churches had heeded the call to Africanise Christianity, salvation was still preached as avoiding eternal condemnation in hell and striving to achieve eternal life with Christ in the hereafter.

The failure of the missionary churches to creatively merge African culture with the Christian message led to the emergence of AICs during the late 19th to mid-20th century. Africans desired spiritual healing, and wanted to combat witchcraft and understand spirit possession, among others.²⁰ These were uncomfortable territories for the mainline churches. In response, some African Christians created churches that related Christianity to the traditional African view of the world by featuring traditions such as polygamy and belief in African cosmology. Since an African worldview shaped the texture of faith in these churches, the concept of salvation was African in outlook. Salvation was viewed from a holistic perspective embracing the spiritual, social and economic dimensions of life. Hence, in these churches, the salvific act of Christ not only leads to an eternal life hereafter but also includes the total well-being of a believer in the here and now.

This understanding of salvation seeped into the Pentecostal brand of Christianity that emerged in the mid-20th century. With emphasis on the presence of the Holy Spirit in ministry and worship, Pentecostals focus on holistic salvation. Asamoah-Gyadu, in agreement with Philip Jenkins, asserts that the Pentecostals’ notions of salvation are personal as they focus on individual well-being and success.²¹ This is not to say that the classical Christian understanding of salvation as the release from sin and reconciliation with Christ in the here now and hereafter do not have a place in Pentecostal ministry. On the contrary, there has been a creative mix of theologies on the afterlife and the

20 Cf. Sundkler 1961, 38–42; Isichei 1995, 241–56; Peel 1968, 72–89.

21 Cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2012, 48.

here and now with a focus on individuals and how they can guarantee a good life. Similar observations exist in the Charismatic and Prophetic churches that have emerged after Pentecostalism. What is innovative with the Charismatic and the Prophetic churches is the emphasis on material things and personal wealth.

Although the two broad frameworks shape the understanding of salvation, it needs to be noted that the mainline churches that initially resisted an “Africanised” Christianity have to a large extent, though in varying degrees, found ways to inculcate African worldviews and culture in their expressions of faith. Thus, it is not surprising that the notion of salvation as deliverance from one’s enemies both physical and spiritual is common among Ghanaian Christians irrespective of their denomination. Asamoah-Gyadu further explains that several factors, such as economic status, besides the African worldview, contribute to the theology of salvation as personal liberation from the troubles of life.²² For instance, the fact that many Ghanaian Christians are poor forces them to adopt a pragmatic faith relevant to their existential needs. A “poor” Ghanaian does not hesitate to know why he/she is condemned to the state of poverty here on earth and to take steps to get out of poverty. Clearly, the African primal worldview of seeking to know one’s destiny is at play here, while prevailing socio-economic conditions serve as a catalyst to forge a theology of salvation that is pragmatic at its core.

This eclectic character of salvation in Ghanaian Christianity should be seen as a plus and not be judged against Western notions of what constitutes genuine Christianity. Rather, self-criticism and reflection should be carried out with the Bible and other relevant theological resources for a normative framework of salvation embedded within the Ghanaian experience. In this respect, I argue that the collective transformative fate of the people should become the fulcrum for theologising salvation. Current theologies of salvation already contain the seeds of being contextually and existentially relevant. In other words, notions of salvation have emerged from the African worldview of holistic well-being, rooted in daily experiences. However, in relation to the extent to which theologies of salvation can and should transform society, present theologies fail. With their emphasis on the individual, present theologies are hopeful of causing societal change through the cumulative salvation of individuals. However, these theologies neglect structural problems that frame the collective fate of the people such as failures in leadership, corruption, and the general moral decadence within Ghanaian society.

22 Cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2012, 58–9.

Ghanaian Christians sometimes allude to the New Testament understanding of salvation as a personal battle (cf. John 3:3, 16; Eph 2:8–9). This notion produces a society of people centred on their own personal needs and less concerned about their collective well-being. Because of the focus on the individual, Ghanaian churches appear nonchalant to “bigger” issues that underpin the country’s socio-economic woes and at best have been reactive in addressing some of the issues. Recently for instance, Christian communities were in the news over their proposed interventions in the fight against *Galamsey* (a destructive form of illegal mining). However, the *Galamsey* menace has been a problem for some time now, and only recently reaching proportions that threaten the collective survival of the nation. Ridiculed and publicly battered by some Ghanaians, the churches risk losing their relevance as they continue to be nonchalant to the problems that bedevil Ghanaian society and threaten their survival.

4. Appropriation: Rethinking Salvation in Ghanaian Christianity

As the last pole, appropriation is the moment when the reader creatively navigates between the two contexts of the text and in order to generate resources for theological reflection and transformative action. Three key elements stand out after my engagement with the salvation oracles of Hosea and Isaiah: 1) salvation as corporate, 2) salvation as change, and 3) salvation as cooperation between God and humans. These dimensions as gleaned will be put into dialogue with current notions of salvation within the Ghanaian context to explore how the latter can be shaped and transformed by the former.

4.1 Salvation is Corporate

According to the prophets, God relates to his people not only as individuals but as a group. Indeed, God’s relationship with individuals is important insofar as it shapes the fate of the group. Hosea and Isaiah were clear in emphasising this corporate nature of salvation. Hosea addresses the people as “Israel” (14:1 – a term that functions grammatically as a collective noun), a reference to the ten tribes that constituted the northern kingdom. It is all Israel who is to confess their sins to receive God’s blessings (14:2–7). In Isaiah, the channel for salvation is through an individual, the “shoot” from Jesse. This individual is important because the destiny of the people is tied to his success or failure. God plays his role by endowing the individual with the necessary qualities,

including “wisdom” and “fear of the Lord.” These qualities propel the leader to ensure the equitable administration of justice within society.²³

Current discourses on salvation within Ghanaian Christianity lack the necessary call for collective transformation, mainly because they focus on the individual. The salvation oracles in Hosea and Isaiah challenge this theology since they frame salvation as a corporate drive toward the goal of preserving the community and ensuring its ongoing survival. The Ghanaian Christian Community needs to embrace this prophetic attitude towards salvation by being proactive and adopting a loud voice regarding the issues that threaten the survival of the Ghanaian community. A corporate approach to salvation cannot be achieved through passivity. Like the prophets, the Ghanaian Christian communities can only become relevant when they are proactive and actively engage in seeking solutions to societal problems.

As Isaiah indicated, sometimes the transformation of the group is possible through the actions of individuals. However, these are not ordinary individuals; they are carefully selected persons tasked with making the lives of the people better. In his opening oracles (1:10, 23, 26; 5:14), Isaiah describes bad leadership, detailing the evils of leaders who have plunged so many people into poverty and misery. He describes true leadership in his oracle on the shoot from Jesse. As a good leader, the shoot from Jesse will ensure the transformation of the Judean community. In Ghana, such individuals can be equated to public officials with the constitutional mandate to ensure the progress of the nation. Unfortunately, the narrative of public leadership, especially political leadership in Ghana, is one of corruption, nepotism, selfishness and disregard for the rule of law. The bitter truth, however, is that corporate redemption cannot be attained without the principled engagement and ethical leadership of key stakeholders. Through their prophetic roles, Christian communities in Ghana need to confront the fact that they cannot realise holistic salvation as long as they continue to ignore or are indifferent to the decay in the leadership of the nation. The nation's salvation cannot be separated from the qualitative character of her leaders.

4.2 Salvation is Change

Hosea and Isaiah are clear in their message that salvation implies a change, a renewal or movement towards progress. This transition is a prerequisite for any intervention by God and can be realised in two ways: 1) a change of personnel, and 2) a change of conduct. Oracles in Isaiah, for instance, called for a change

23 Cf. Blenkinsopp 2008, 265.

in leadership. Amid the Assyrian crisis, Isaiah envisioned a new leader, one who would be endowed with divine attributes to usher in an era of overflowing justice and peace. The current leadership, together with the elite of the society, had demonstrated failure to the extent that they could no longer lead the people into the transformed society Isaiah envisioned. Elsewhere, Isaiah also alludes to a change among the people when he speaks of the remnant (4:2–6). Although the motif of remnant is not always positive, in several of Isaiah's oracles he uses it as an assurance of God's salvation to come (1:9; 4:3; and 10:20–22). Thus, salvation is possible when a selected few (the remnant) from the old stock are given the chance of a new beginning. They will carry the memory of the past, which will shape them in the present and future.

Change is also to be realised in the conduct of the people. A transformed society cannot continue to do things as in the past. This is why Hosea emphasises a change in heart and conduct through confession. Through a clever use of the motive of *return*, Hosea draws attention to the fundamental condition that salvation is possible only when there is repentance, a change necessitated by the reunion between God and people.

Ghanaian Christianity needs to reflect critically on the concept of salvation as change. Many hope for a transformed society, but this cry for salvation is only possible in the context of change, especially at the leadership level. Ghana's history reveals democracy and military rule alternating, with democracy ultimately dominating as the preferred governance system. Although change is realised through the voting out and voting in of preferred leaders, few would reject the claim that there has not been a corresponding improvement in the lives of the majority of Ghanaians. Rather, throughout Ghana's post-independence period, corruption and poverty have increased, state resources continue to be mismanaged, and the nation's natural resources are being depleted with little to show for them in return. Certainly, the change needed for transformation is not the change realised in the voting in and voting out of politicians. This is where Ghanaian Christianity needs to reflect critically on how to achieve qualitative leadership for the nation.

Isaiah speaks of change in terms of a remnant, a selected few from the people who begin a new life with hope and believe in restoration. However, the idea of a remnant also signifies judgment, death, and destruction. Recent data from the Afrobarometer reveal that while a majority of Ghanaians express a preference for democratic governance over alternative political systems, a notable minority dissent from this view. Furthermore, even among those who endorse democracy in principle, scepticism persists regarding the efficacy and integrity of democratic institutions. This disillusionment manifests in extreme discursive currents, including nostalgic appeals for the return of colonial rule,

calls for military intervention, and radical proposals – such as the elimination of the adult population – as purported solutions to national redemption. Such rhetoric, though marginal, reflects deeper sociopolitical frustrations and warrants critical examination within frameworks of democratic consolidation and political trust. These beliefs are signs of deep frustrations brewing on the streets and the Christian communities cannot continue to ignore them. There is a need for a critical reflection on the theology of the remnant and what that could mean for transforming Ghanaian society.

4.3 Salvation is Cooperation Between God and Humans

A corollary to the above is the understanding that salvation requires human effort and involvement. Although God is the main agent in effecting salvation, salvation cannot be realised without human effort and cooperation. Human effort here means the conscious engagement and commitment of the people toward their well-being. God reserves a dynamic role for humans in the process of salvation. In Hosea 14, for instance, God's saving intervention (v.4) is premised on a series of actions by the people. They are to twice "return" (v.1 and v.2 – שׁוּב), "take" (לִקַּח) and "say" (אָמַר). These actions clearly reflect their active role in the journey to redemption. The conclusion to the oracle requires the people to engage in a series of actions: they are to "understand and discern" (בִּין), "know" (יָדַע) and "walk" (הֵלֵךְ) in the ways of the Lord; that is, once they are reconciled with God, their salvation will be realised.

A theology of the human person as a partner with God in effecting change is needed in Ghanaian Christianity. Change at the corporate level is possible only when Ghanaian Christians yearn and work towards the desired change. Humans thus become God's instrument in bringing about change. With the help of God, Ghanaian Christians would have to work out their collective salvation, which aims at a society that places a premium on human dignity, shaped by the twin concepts of justice and righteousness.

Conclusion

This essay has proposed a new understanding of salvation for the Ghanaian Christian community. Engagement with the text reveals that Israelite prophets conceptualised salvation as a transformative process initiated by God but needing the commitment of humans. Salvation thus signals a change, a renewal and a reconstruction. This understanding could shape a proper construction of the theology of salvation among Ghanaian Christian communities. This is

imperative if the churches in Ghana are to be relevant in shaping the collective fate of Ghanaians. Since salvation requires some sort of action on the part of believers, how it is conceptualised is important to elicit the needed participation and response of believers.

I conclude that when salvation is theologised as the collective and transformative well-being of the people here and now, and hereafter, the foundations for a theological praxis can be laid, one that shifts the understandings of salvation from the individual to the community, one that changes the Christian community from being passive observers to active participants. A corporate perspective on salvation will demand a change in our theological reasoning and praxis. It will also demand a concerted effort and commitment on the part of the Christian communities to improve the lives of their people through a prophetic ministry that places the well-being of society at the centre.

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KETUBIM



Suffering and Prosperity Preaching: Intercultural Reading of Job 22–27

Nicoletta Gatti

Introduction

Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity is at a historic crossroad. The theology of the cross seems to be vanishing from its orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a paradigm shift from ‘cross to prosperity preaching.’¹ Any manifestation of suffering, such as poverty, sickness and death, is justified as a mental construction, deficient faith, demonic activity, an ancestral curse, witchcraft, or a hidden sin.² In fact, according to the proponents of the prosperity gospel, God has not created suffering but has subdued it through Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, perceived that if a person suffers, his/her salvation is questionable.

Consequently, Christians who endure suffering feel isolated, discouraged and inhibited from sharing their agonising situations with their pastors and communities, afraid to be victimised.³ Their struggle echoes that of Job, who, based on his own experience and trust in God, refuses the answer of the traditional retributive theology and searches for a theology able “to embrace pain.”⁴

Employing dialogical hermeneutics,⁵ this contribution intends to offer an intercultural reading of Job’s debate with his friends to find in the call to action of the text possible ways to give hope to Ghanaian Christians who cannot reconcile their faith with their experience.

This article is articulated in four sections. After a hermeneutical reflection, three steps are proposed: an exegesis of the Ghanaian Christian reality; an exegesis of Job 22–27; and a dialogue between the text and the Ghanaian cultural context.

1 Cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 105–20; Boamah 2022, 1–2; Gatti and Ossom-Batsa 2020, 135–57.

2 Cf. Agana 2016, 206–7; cf. Gifford 1990, 373–88.

3 Cf. Heuser 2015, 15–29.

4 Brueggemann 1985, 398–9; cf. Gatti and Ossom-Batsa 2023, 195–206.

5 Cf. Gatti 2017, 46–67.

1. Methodological Reflection: Intercultural Exegesis

The syntagm “Intercultural Exegesis” crossed the threshold of an academic institution in 1979. It was the topic of a seminar offered by Fritzleo Lentzen-Deis at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. The stimulus was the “Letter on Inculturation” sent to his congregation on May 14, 1978 by Pedro Arrupe SJ, Provost General of the Society of Jesus.⁶ Two years later, Lentzen-Deis offered the first course of Intercultural Exegesis in Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology, Frankfurt am Main. In 1989, with a group of former students, he founded the international research project *Interkulturelle Exegese*, which spread to several countries around the world.⁷

However, despite these pioneering works and the intercultural approaches theorised in the “academic peripheries” of the world (Africa, Asia, Latin America), historical-critical methods continued to dominate Western academic circles, silencing other voices and interpretive models. Intercultural exegesis was deemed to be a “pastoral approach” devoid of “scientific” status.

This situation has radically changed in the last three decades in which a multiplicity of methods and approaches have ‘erupted’ in academia.⁸ Exegesis has become aware of the *intentio lectoris*, focusing on the act of reading as appropriation, application, transposition and translation of the text within the cultural horizon of the reader. Since Sacred Scripture is an invitation to a *midrash*, to an active and committed research,⁹ the meaning of the text cannot be sought only at the origin, but in the “fusion of horizons”¹⁰ between the text and the reader. Through reading, readers expand their own horizon and participate in the revelation, becoming themselves scribes (Matt 13:52), because “divine words grow with those who read them.”¹¹

The Bible itself is a testimony of this intercultural process. For example, in ‘narrating’ God to the men and women of his time, the prophet Hosea employed images drawn from the concrete reality of his listeners: lifestyle,

6 Cf. Aixala 1978.

7 For information about publications and events, cf. the official website of the Association: <https://www.evangeliumetcultura.org/deutschland/>. In 1986, one of Lenzen-Deis’s students, Eloy Sanchez Roman, discussed the first doctoral dissertation in which intercultural exegesis was employed as the hermeneutical approach: “Proyecto y educación en Mc 3,153–19. Ensayo de *interpretación intercultural* del proyecto de Jesús con Los Doce.”

8 Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993, 34–72.

9 Cf. Vignolo 1998, 59; cf. Eco 1979, 51–60.

10 Gadamer 1960; Vignolo 1998, 29. The translation is mine.

11 “*Quia divina eloquia cum legente crescunt*,” Gregory the Great, *In Hiez.* 1, 7, 8: PL 76, 843. Cf. Gatti 2007, 25–45.

feasts and family life.¹² Speaking to the Athenians, Paul used their poets and philosophers, and valued their piety.¹³ In this process, the encounter with the word enriches, transforms and reshapes the receiving culture so that a new creation emerges, while the word itself “takes on the characteristics proper to a culture, expresses itself in a way that is connatural to it, resulting in an enriched expression of faith.”¹⁴

In Africa, starting from the conviction that the context constitutes the flesh of the logos (John 1:14), different methods and approaches have been developed to incarnate the Gospel on the continent. These methods follow two trajectories: contextualisation and liberation (“reconstruction”) theology.¹⁵ Loba-Mkole considers the intercultural approach as a “methodological expansion and an epistemological reconfiguration of the inculturation paradigm.”¹⁶ In my opinion, intercultural exegesis constitutes a ‘beyond,’ because it offers a synthesis of both contextualisation and liberation theologies. It focuses not only on the evangelisation of the culture but on a transformative dialogue able to engage and challenge the receiving culture, while at the same time reaching a new and often deeper understanding of the text.¹⁷

The point of departure lies in the conviction that Scripture entails a call to action, a call to active and responsible participation. With the incarnation of the Logos, God communicated himself and shaped a community capable of interacting with him. In other words, “listening to the sacred texts the reader meets the linguistic acts of a God who informs, commands, admonishes, consoles and moulds a new community able to transform itself and society.”¹⁸

However, despite the lively hermeneutic debate, countless publications and conferences, we cannot but recognise the persisting chasm between academic and pastoral reading of the Bible on the African continent. The result is the pervasive diffusion of fundamentalist readings, which offer an immediate answer to people’s problems, and the worrisome fragmentation of the Christian communion.¹⁹ The situation offers a hermeneutical challenge that this present paper intends to address.

12 Cf. Gatti and Ossom-Batsa 2015, 201–23.

13 Cf. Wördemann 2022: 79–96.

14 Pasqualetti 2010, 238.

15 Cf. Ukpong 2000, 11–28; Ossom-Batsa 2007, 91–104; Loba-Mkole 2021, 1–8.

16 Loba-Mkole 2021, 2.

17 Cf. Loba-Mkole 2021, 2.

18 Gatti 2021, 257–8; cf. Brown 2007, 252–73.

19 Jenkins 2006, 7.

2. Exegesis of Reality: The Ghanaian Christian Context

Ghana is dealing with a dramatic economic crisis: the inflation rate in June 2023 was 42.5%;²⁰ the current debt to GDP ratio is 78%; and the projected depreciation of the Ghana cedi for 2023 against the US dollar is 22%.²¹ Corruption and the politicisation of every aspect of life prevent the structural reforms and long-term plans indispensable to counteract the devastating effects of global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic and the instability of the geopolitical region.²²

In this situation of fear for the future and distrust toward the political system, Ghanaians cling to religion to find a solution. Data from the 2022 census demonstrates this:²³ 95.6% of the population declare they are religious; 71.3% embrace Christianity, 17.6% Islam, and 6.2% African Traditional Religions. Among Christians, 31.6% belong to Pentecostal/Charismatic churches; 17.4% to Protestant churches; 12.3% to other denominations (AIC, Prophetic Churches, etc.), and 10% to the Roman Catholic Church.

What image of God are churches offering to a population striving for meaning? To answer this question, it is important to emphasise that contemporary Ghanaian Christianity can be defined as ‘charismatic’ in character and worldview.²⁴ Even the Historic Mission Churches have adopted the language, style of worship and leadership typical of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches.²⁵ Listening to sermons broadcast day and night from traditional and new media, a similar portrayal of a God emerges: a God of miracle and power, who bestows prosperity to those who are ‘born again,’ pay ‘tithes’ and obey the directions of ‘men and women of God.’ Furthermore, the concept that adversity should not be a ‘portion’ of Christian life is hammered not only by preaching, but also

20 Ghana Statistic Service, “Ghana, June 2023 Consumer Price Index and Inflation,” *Press Release* (12th July 2023).

21 EIC, “Inflation in Africa will ebb slowly in 2023,” December 15, 2022 – Economist Intelligence Unit (eiu.com). Accessed January 20, 2023.

22 Cf. IMF Country Report 2023, 4–5.

23 Cf. Ghana Statistical Service 2021, 72.

24 For an understanding of the origin and development of Pentecostalism in Ghana, cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 10–8.

25 Cf. Ossom-Batsa 2018, 14–5; Omenyo, 2006.

through catchphrases on T-shirts, wristbands and bumper stickers,²⁶ and the names of popular mega-churches and religious programs.²⁷

To understand this vision of salvation and attitude towards suffering, it is necessary to journey to the root of the phenomenon. If the “prosperity gospel is a distinctly American invention,” whose origin is traceable to the end of 19th century in the New Thought Movement,²⁸ its popularity and worldwide diffusion derive from its capacity to metamorphose and adapt to different contexts. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, positive thinking focused on ‘faith’ in the healing power of the mind. With the growing success of the medical sciences, attention shifted from healing to financial success. Thus, a catchy slogan such as “Name-it-and-Claim-it” could disseminate the belief that ‘richness’ is the portion of every Christian. The next step was to claim that faith is financially measurable. Consequently, “failure to receive comes from failure to believe adequately, confess positive belief or failure to claim.”²⁹ The final outcome is the “to reap, one must sow” dogma. Therefore, ‘believers’ are requested to show their faith through the payment of tithes, harvest and thanksgiving offerings, etc., which are essential to ‘holistic salvation.’³⁰

The popularity of the prosperity gospel in Africa derives from two main factors: the promise of emancipation from poverty and the resonance with the African Traditional worldview.³¹ In my view, the consequences of this new ecclesiological trend are devastating. These include: a selective/fundamentalist reading of the Bible; a reduction of the covenant to a ‘contract’ between God and the ‘believer’;³² laying blame on the poor and the demonisation of

26 The following are some examples collected by my students on our university campus: More than Conquerors (Rom 8:37); If God be for us who can be against us? (Rom 8:31); I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Phil 4:13); I am a Winner; I am a Stranger to Failure, Unstoppable Achievers; The Struggle is Over; I am smelling Success; There is Power in the Blood; My God is able; etc.

27 E.g. Victory Bible Church, Winners Chapel and Powerhouse Chapel International. The following are themes of crusades and conventions printed on billboards: Possessing your Possessions; Stepping into Greatness; Highway to Success; and The Best is yet to Come.

28 Cf. Wrenn 2021, 295.

29 See, for example, Heward-Mills 2008, 22, 38. The author encourages readers to “tap” into the power of the tongue. E.g. they are asked to say the following prayer loudly, “Let poverty run away from my home,” and even to order their bank accounts to come alive.

30 “Prosperity in its basic form consists of someone sowing a seed and later harvesting the returns. Not paying your tithes separates you from this most basic principle of sowing and reaping. When you do not pay your tithes, you harm your finances because you take away the foundations of your prosperity.” Heward-Mills 2011, 1.

31 Cf. Togarasei 2011, 336–50; Adamo 2021, 1–10; Chilongani 2007, 51–75.

32 Cf. Walton 2012, 111.

poverty;³³ growing individualism; and indifference towards social justice and advocacy.³⁴

Against this backdrop, we need to interrogate how prosperity believers deal with the human experience of suffering. Their first reaction is to ignore it because following the tenet of positive confession, 'to speak about hardship is to attract hardship.' When the situation cannot be kept secret, the reaction is to blame a personal failure on the part of the one who suffers. Suggested solutions involve prayer camps, deliverance services, and confession of sin. An interesting study by Bowler discloses that in some cases, there is "the rationalise of hardship as righteous suffering," quoting the book of Job, while only "a minority would quietly and privately question the church."³⁵

From the above discussion, it emerges that the inability to embrace suffering is the limitation of every 'contractual' theology based on a rigid application of the principle of retributive justice. It is a theology "of coherence and rationality" that creates "a world in which pain needs not occur; and when it occurs, pain is a failure to be corrected."³⁶ It is a theology ready to sacrifice the person to save its own image of God, able to speak *about* God but not *with* God,³⁷ as the following pages illustrate.

3. Exegesis of the Text: Job 22–27

After seven days and seven nights (2:13) Job cries out, breaking the silence (3:1–26), thus introducing the poetic section of the book, which is articulated in a series of dialogues: with three friends, with God, and with the readers as well. Chapters 4–27 convey three cycles of dialogues between Job and his three friends, whose exchanges become increasingly violent and chaotic, degenerating at last into a series of irreconcilable monologues.³⁸

The readers gradually perceive that their dialogues are actually a debate about two visions of the world, two theological approaches: a "mechanistic idea of retribution"³⁹ and the real experience of a person. The three friends are, in fact, emblematic of theological and ideological realities; they reiterate a single theological vision, exposed against the backdrop of the three parts of

33 Cf. Obadara 2016, 1–8.

34 Cf. Agana 2016, 81.

35 Bowler 2018, 175–6.

36 Brueggemann 1985, 43.

37 Cf. Phillips 2008, 42–3.

38 Cf. Alonso Schökel and Sicre Díaz 1995, 96.

39 Kaminsky 2015, 301–2.

the Tanak. Eliphaz draws his arguments from the prophetic tradition (4:13–21; 22:4–13); Bildad employs a wisdom approach (8:3–7; 25:2–6), and Zophar repeats the Deuteronomistic principles (11:5–12).⁴⁰ They are the theologians, the philosophers, those who throughout human history have sought a solution to the questions of evil and pain, producing ‘well-packaged’ ideological prescriptions. The book of Job becomes, then, a very harsh polemic against simplistic ideologies disengaged from reality, so elaborately crafted from the perspective of someone locked in an ivory tower, with no bridge of communication with the real world.⁴¹

Chapters 22–27 contain the last cycle of dialogue characterised by an exacerbated aggressiveness of the three visitors. Their tone rises as the accusations against Job become more specific.⁴² For his part, Job finds himself alone with his growing anguish; his friends withdraw; God remains silent. Maintaining the conviction of his own innocence, Job is forced to defer to God alone, whose blameless greatness and unjust behaviour he simultaneously perceives.

The order of the entry of the friends seems disrupted in the Masoretic text. Scholars debate if the text is irreparably altered,⁴³ or if the chaotic appearance preserved by the last redactor intended to communicate to the readers Job’s profound bewilderment of being caught in an impossible, or in any case, misguided dialogue.⁴⁴ I embrace the second hypothesis, and preserve the order of the Masoretic Text.

Job 16:2–6 summarises the previous discussion: Job rejects a modality of theologising that disregards not only the existential situations, pains, desires and hopes of the concrete human being but also the gratuitous love and limitless mercy of God. His friends’ repetitive words bring neither light in Job’s darkness nor consolation in his despair. They are “miserable comforters” (16:2) and “worthless doctors” (13:4). In their effort “to defend God by prevarication and dishonest argument” (13:7), they betray even God, transforming him into an ‘idol.’ As Gutiérrez states, “The self-sufficient talk of these men is the real blasphemy: their words veil and disfigure the face of a God who loves freely and gratuitously. The friends believe in their theology rather than in the God of their theology.”⁴⁵ While they accused Job of criticising God by asserting his innocence, Job argues that God cannot be justified by blaming the innocent.

40 Cf. Ossom-Batsa and Gatti 2023, 200–1.

41 Cf. Collins 2016, 292; Brueggemann 1985, 42–4.

42 Cf. Hawley 2020, 467.

43 This is the hypothesis proposed by Tournay 1957, 321–34.

44 Cf. Radermakers 1998, 96.

45 Gutiérrez 2003, 29.

In the third cycle of dialogues, Job continues his search for God moving from his solipsistic lament towards 'others' who share his own anguish. The poor, the rejected, the oppressed are introduced to the discussion by Eliphaz: if his previous accusations towards Job were generic, he now lists a series of 'social sins' – extortion and harsh treatment of the vulnerable (cf. Exod 22:24–26; Deut 24:10–13); failure to assist others in need (cf. Ezek 18:7; Isa 58:7); oppression of the poor and orphans (cf. Exod 22:21; Ezek 18:2; Isa 1:17) – before concluding with a strong appeal to conversion (22:21–26).

Eliphaz's argument stimulates Job to broaden his horizon and to move the debate from his own situation to the injustice present in the world. His crude analysis (24:2–12) reiterates that the sufferings of the poor have a precise 'human' cause: exploitation and social injustice.⁴⁶ His heart-breaking description manifests that the basic precepts of the Torah are ignored: the shifting of the boundary of the ancestral land (24:2; cf. Deut 19:14, 27, 17; cf. Prov 22:28; 23:10); abuse in the taking of pledges (24:3, 9; cf. Deut 24:10–13; Exod 22:25–26); exploitation of workers and mistreatment of the destitute (24:5–8; cf. Deut 24:14–15; Exod 22:24). However, God is deaf to the cry of the miserable, and silent to the abuse of the wicked – Why doesn't God's light unmask those who operate evil in the darkness? Job concludes his discourse stating that God's indifference and the prosperity of the evil are the ultimate evidence against the existence of a retributive justice (24:22–25).

What follows is a rapid and confused conclusion. The four interlocutors are exhausted: Bildad's words amount to repetitive indictments incapable of carrying further the bold attempt made by Eliphaz, and the debate ceases abruptly in the silence of Zophar. These three theologians could not convince Job with their arguments based on the principle of temporal retribution. They continue to believe him guilty of rebellion against God and wicked obstinacy. Job, for his part, has not been able to persuade them of his innocence, or the merits of his claim and challenge to God. Job remains alone, abandoned by God and by men. His suffering may have grown throughout the dialogue, but his faith has not been bent and his hope remains intact.⁴⁷

To sum up, Job moved from 'common theology' to 'embracing the pain' as he realised that his friends were opting to reiterate acquired concepts, rather than admitting the real drama of concrete human beings, or asking questions that would force them to journey towards a deeper understanding of God and his words.

46 For a detailed exegesis of the text, see Gatti and Ossom-Batsa 2020, 135–57.

47 Cf. Houck-Loomis 2016, 27–9; Gatti and Salakpi 2022, 52.

In his search for God, Job's vision widens. He ponders on the pain of the 'others'⁴⁸ and he recalls that true belief in God demands solidarity with the poor. "The meeting with the poor becomes, therefore, for Job a further motivation for a deeper insight into divine justice and an unlimited encounter with a new image of God."⁴⁹

4. Engagement

Journeying with Job, the reader encounters a community questioning the meaning of its own election. In a concrete historical situation in which all concepts about God's justice, covenant or promises seem confuted by experience, suffering is a reality irrefutable and without compensation.

The God codified by 'contractual' theology becomes "the *Deus absconditus* who conceals his face to creatures by governing their fate from on high, and whose word resounds only in the travail of their consciences."⁵⁰

The book of Job, therefore, questions every theology that denies reality, that silences questions and the lament of the sufferer, that reduces God to a *quid pro quo* idol, easily manipulable. Furthermore, it emphasises the consequences of such theology for communities in which faith is relevant. Every form of retributive theology portrays God as 'above the fray,' transcendent, and beyond protest; the social effect is the legitimization of the socio-religious structures that claim to speak in the name of God. If this theology offers coherence, rationality and stability, it creates a clear distinction between the saved and the unsaved, the believer and the unbeliever, and is unable to deal with pain in terms of policies and symbols.

Job invites Ghanaian readers to question the tenets of the prosperity gospel, face the scandal of existence, to cross the threshold of denial, to break its silence and become prophetic voices in their denomination and in society. An existential theology capable of embracing pain encounters God as an incarnate God, a 'God in the fray,' who wants to be recognised in the outcasts and to walk with his people to transform this world into his kingdom. This theology could generate communities ready to descend into the underworld of history where the poor, the marginalised, the lost, and the outcasts of every society are hidden, to bring solidarity, resurrection and God's Life into the bleeding desert of human history.

48 Cf. Gutiérrez 2003, 31–8.

49 Gatti and Ossom-Batsa 2020, 155.

50 Morselli 1977, 35.

Conclusion

Walking with Job and his friends in a time of crisis, contemporary Ghanaian Christians may uncover the deception of a ‘gospel’ that reduces the relationship with God to a ‘contract,’ and measures salvation and human value with economic success. They may thus begin to comprehend the silence to which positive thinking condemns them, and the resulting corruption and indifference that corrupts the social fabric like a woodworm.

With Job, the readers can learn to protest, to become a voice for the many voiceless (24:1–17) who perceive poverty and sickness as a stigma and socio-religious alienation. And, perhaps, their voices may oblige our communities to become centres of presence and education, “field hospitals” that “embrace human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.”⁵¹

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51 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (November 24, 2013).

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NT Contributions

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The Relevance of Imagining and Experiencing Jesus as “Life-Saviour” in West Africa: A Hermeneutical Reflection on the Use of Agyenkwa as Rendition of Greek σωτήρ (sōtēr)

Werner Kahl

Introduction

At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, a prominent ‘man of God’ in Ghana declared in March of 2020 that the coronavirus would not enter the country because he had spiritually blocked the entry for the virus by invoking “the powerful name” of Jesus. Shortly afterwards, the first COVID cases were registered in Ghana, and that ‘archbishop’ was seen preaching with a plastic shield in front of his face. Instantly, a joke went viral on social media, saying, “Some men of God are waiting for the pandemic to be over so they can continue to perform miracles.” In this paper, I will concentrate on interpretations of Jesus as saviour in the context of Ghana.

The COVID pandemic was largely only a *potential* health crisis in Ghana, with relatively few people dying of the contraction of the virus.¹ The imposed restrictions made life even more challenging for many in a society where it can be a struggle to live from day-to-day. Besides poverty and high unemployment rates, the following factors contribute to widespread experiences of crisis in the country which endanger life: an insufficient health care system, regular flooding in the rainy season, desertification in the northern region due to climate change, mismanagement of forests and inappropriate methods of agriculture. Ghana, however, is a stable democracy, and the country is relatively peaceful compared to other West African nations. In addition, to date, there is no terrorism in the name of Islam in Ghana. Hence, the general situation should not be painted as completely bleak.

Some prominent Africans, including Ghanaian scholars of religion or theology, have claimed that West Africans were “by nature” deeply religious: *homo*

¹ <https://www.corona-in-zahlen.de/weltweit/ghana> (as of Sept 15, 2025).

africanus homo religiosus radicaliter.² I am not sure if I would subscribe to this generalisation. However, the fact of the matter is, and it becomes especially obvious when compared to Western European concepts of reality, that, for example, in Ghana an understanding of reality is shared by many according to which events in the physical or visible world are thought to be embedded in a wider invisible web of activities of spiritual powers. Therefore, any predicament in the visible world could be attributed to a spiritual, invisible cause. The reversal of a predicament attributed to a spiritual cause, therefore, needs the engagement of a more powerful spiritual agent able and willing to overcome anything that is lacking, be it of the category of life and health, business success, travel plans, relationships or procreation. This experience and understanding of reality, together with the corresponding strategies to manipulate reality, has been described as a fundamental feature of African traditional culture. It has lingered on even if at present African traditional religion is no longer as visible. Religious scholars have claimed that charismatic Christianity in the subregion is to a certain extent a continuum of the local population's traditional understanding of the world. This is certainly not surprising since all versions of Christianity connect to certain degrees to regional or local customs and values. What is remarkable for West Africa, including Ghana, is that people have appropriated Christianity on their own terms after missionaries had tried to forcefully implant Western versions of Christianity in the sub-region before and during colonial times.

In West Africa, including Ghana, we now witness the great self-confidence of church leaders with respect to the *claim of truth* of their allegedly inspired biblical interpretations – an attitude that matches similar claims of Western theologians and exegetes especially in past generations. Rather, they claimed an intellectual ability to distinguish once and for all between false and correct notions, attributing the latter to their own interpretations. Today, as exegetes, we see more clearly than the generations before us that there is more than one valid possibility of interpreting and understanding a given biblical passage. And by the way, many results in exegesis that seemed unshakable just a generation ago, are no longer seriously considered.³

2 Pobe 1996, 166.

3 E.g. the present discussion on the synoptic problem, the new perspective on Paul, the assessment of ancient Judaism, diachronic historical-critical exegesis vs. synchronic semiotic and literary exegesis.

1. Jesus as Powerful Life-Saviour

I would like to attempt to make plausible the meaning, potential and attraction of the term saviour as the main attribute attached to Jesus in West African popular Christianity. In the English New Testament, the term "saviour" is the word used to translate the Greek word σωτήρ, which occurs seventeen times as an attribute of Jesus.⁴ According to the synoptic Gospels and Acts, miracle healings can be presented as manifestations of Jesus' saving activity (σώζειν). However, the σωτηρία, or the salvation caused by Jesus, or also by God (eight times), has a wide potential of meaning. It is neither to be limited to miracle healings nor to the eternal salvation connected to a spiritual component of the human being, such as the "soul." Rather, σωτηρία encompasses both material and spiritual dimensions, the individual and the communal existence in the present and in the beyond.⁵

Saviour, as an attribute of Jesus understood in the context of the English encyclopaedia semiotic sense of the word, tends to connote Jesus' relevance for the eternal salvation of souls in much the same way as the German *Heiland* or *Erlöser*. In the Ghanaian Akan languages, however, the Greek σωτήρ or English "saviour" is rendered and conceptualised as *agyenkwa*, which literally means *saviour of life* or *protector of life*.⁶

The attribute "saviour" indicates the prevailing interest in Jesus in much of contemporary West African Christianity. In addition, the New Testament is being read from the perspective of this interest. In order to come close to an *emic*, or insider, understanding of this attribution, it is necessary to understand its underlying implications within the context of African traditional spirituality. Here we encounter an overriding concern with material well-being as the essential objective of prayer to the gods or veneration of the ancestors.⁷ In this respect, we observe a strong continuation of Pentecostal or Charismatic types of Christianity along with African traditional spirituality.

The interest in well-being in the here and now also finds expression in the choice of John 3:16 as a favoured Bible verse in the subregion.⁸ I quote from the King James Version, which is widespread in West Africa: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." I am concerned here with

4 E.g., Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23; Eph 5:23; Phil 3:20.

5 Cf. Kahl 2012, 127–44.

6 Cf. Kahl 2014, 276–7.

7 Cf. Opoku 1978.

8 Cf. the discussion in Kahl 2007, 261–3; Anum 1999.

the ending of the verse – everlasting life. Most English translations read here “eternal life,” clearly referring to life beyond. The Akan or Twi translation of the underlying Greek ζωὴ αἰώνιος, however, has a slightly shifted meaning – *daa nkwa*, literally meaning “life from day to day,” with a focus on life in the here and now. Interestingly, this expression captures an important aspect of the Johannine understanding of life, stressing the continuation of the God-given realm of life for the believers from present times into eternity.⁹

There are other implications of *agyenkwa* – saviour or protector of life – that are likely to go unnoticed by Western observers. They are, however, of central importance for a proper understanding of West Africans’ interest in Jesus as saviour or protector of life. One of the most well-known Jesus-songs in West Africa brings into play the following spiritual dimension of this concern for life:

Jesus power, super power
 Jesus power, super power (4x loud)
 Satan power, powerless power (4x soft)
 Jesus power, super power (4x loud and eruptive)
 Mami Wata power, powerless power (4x loud)
 Jesus power, super power (x times loud and eruptive)

What is expressed here is the experience of an endangered life. It is constantly threatened by events that might cause misfortune or an untimely death. And people – whether Muslims, Christians or traditionalists – easily attribute such predicaments to the activity of evil spirits or to curses. One of the main reasons for the success of Pentecostalism in the subregion is its ability to connect to the traditional knowledge of the spirit world. As pointed out above, according to this knowledge system, the visible world is embedded in a wider net of spiritual powers. These powers might affect all spheres of life; they are experienced as an ever-present and threatening reality. For life to be successful, it is of paramount importance to prevent evil spirits from attacking.

This mode of perceiving, manipulating and forecasting reality is not irrational, and it is also not the expression of a naivety of allegedly primitive people, as the premature judgments of Westerners – including theologians – would typically determine. People with this world-knowledge system do distinguish between cause and effect, and allow for causes that can be attributed to the activity of invisible spirits. From this perspective, the world is much wider than conceptions of the world originating in the Enlightenment tradition of

9 Cf. Smith 1995, 149–50.

the West. That spirits are real is common knowledge in West Africa, and this knowledge is shared by all strata of society, including academicians. The extent of, and readiness to reckon with, the involvement of evil spirits in actual situations, of course, varies.

Many traditional religious systems of West African ethnic groups share practices aimed at harming people. In West African societies, these practices, as well as the objects symbolising a spiritual power, are called *Juju*. This belief constitutes the distinct context in which and through which people generally make sense of Jesus in West Africa. Jesus as *agyenkwa* fulfils the function of a spiritual agent able to ward off adverse spirits, resulting in an improvement of life.¹⁰

It is not uncommon among West Africans to approach various spiritual figures for the same purpose; for instance, Mami Wata is also invoked for an improvement of life. She is regarded as a powerful water spirit and is much feared along the west coast of Africa.¹¹ Her spirit typically takes on the shape of a mermaid living in the ocean or in rivers. She is encircled by a snake that represents her collaboration with the traditional god Dan. On the coast from Ghana to Nigeria, people approach Mami Wata especially for matters of individual business success. They employ her powers to drive away adverse spirits hindering success. She, however, is a spirit with an ambivalent character; if one fails to abide by the contract drawn up with Mami Wata, the supplicant is expected to be severely punished spiritually. One can also fall victim to her evil intentions nurtured by her envy and, typically, the person goes mad.

As an evil-minded spirit, Mami Wata typically features in action movies produced in Nigeria's film industry, Nollywood. These well-known movies boost the deep-seated fear that many in West Africa harbour regarding spirit powers in traditional religion. As Birgit Meyer has shown, African traditional religion in general, and bush or water spirits, local gods, and ancestors in particular, has been demonised by Pentecostals and Charismatic Christians – in keeping with similar notions typical of European missionaries to West Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹²

It is within such an epistemic system that Jesus is conceptualised as saviour or protector of life. He is perceived as a spiritual power stronger than *Juju* or any demonised spiritual force of African traditional religion, such as Mami Wata. Thus, the above song explicitly declares: "Mami Wata power, powerless power."

10 Cf. Ekem 1994, 34; Atiemo 1995.

11 Cf. Lademann-Priemer 2013; Drewal 2008.

12 Cf. Meyer 1999.

This constellation of competition between antagonistic spiritual powers recalls the belief in the ancient world, according to which Jesus' healing powers were compared with those of the great healing God Asclepios, whom Christians demonised. With the rise of the Christian faith as the mainline religion in the late Roman Empire, churches were typically built at sites of temples formerly dedicated to Asclepios.¹³ This resulted in the expression that Jesus was stronger and more powerful than Asclepios. At the same time, this belief in Jesus as *Christus Victor* indicated a continuity with local versions of primal religions that might provide the ground for an interpretation of Christ limited to the issue of spiritual power. As an extreme, this might result in a conceptualisation of Christ along the lines of traditional conceptions of spiritual powers that not only strengthen but also destroy life. An example follows.

The Ghanaian exegete Solomon Avotri affirmed that the synoptic Gospel writers "express very clearly an awareness and experience of a spiritual reality similar to those of the Ewe."¹⁴ Referring to the story about the demon-possessed man in Gerasa in Mark 5:1–20, Avotri observes: "Mark shows that Jesus and the demonic powers are on a collision course, but there is no doubt in Mark's mind who the winner is in this cosmic contest. For Ewe readers, these stories affirm their beliefs in the spirit world."¹⁵ Drawing on his own cultural universe, Avotri clearly analyses and describes the dynamics at play in the story, i.e. what the semiotician Algirdas Greimas has called the "polemic structure" of narratives:¹⁶ "For Legion, Jesus is a tormentor, for the man, he is a liberator."¹⁷ Even the motif of spirits entering animals, like legions of spirits enter the pigs in Mark 5, can find an analogy in the experience of West Africans from the countryside, as Avotri points out. Drawing on my own fieldwork in Ghana, I can give evidence of this experience. During a Bible study on Mark 5 in a small, charismatic neighbourhood church, I was asked by a farmer: "Pastor, I have a goat that looks at me very strange. Do you think it has a demon?" What became clear is that the reading of the Bible in a traditional West African context "gives space to the basic concerns of the Ewe about the life-destroying powers of the unseen world, but at the same time promises the possibility of deliverance, transformation, and restoration by a force more powerful."¹⁸

13 Cf. Lehmann 2006, 83–5.

14 Avotri 2000, 318.

15 Avotri 2000, 319.

16 Greimas and Courtés 1993, 284.

17 Avotri 2000, 321.

18 Avotri 2000, 324.

Concerning Africa, classicists working in West Africa have long recognised the potential of African traditional perspectives in unlocking dimensions of meaning in ancient texts that have gone unnoticed from a West European perspective. Kwame Bediako of Ghana saw Africa in this respect even as a "laboratory for the world." To support this claim, he quotes the classicist John Ferguson, who taught in Nigeria in the 1960s:

Our Classics department is set in one of the few parts of the world where you can still consult oracles, where there are tonal languages (as Classical Greek was tonal), where there is a living tradition of religious dance-drama (what is Greek tragedy in origin but that?), where sacrifice is understood, where contemporary society offers many fascinating parallels to ancient Greek and Roman society. Nigerian scholars, if they will look at the classics with Nigerian and not European eyes, can interpret the classics to us in ways no European scholar can do.¹⁹

This applies also to the study of the Bible in general and of the New Testament in particular. For example, the interpretation of certain events as miracles is widespread in West Africa. There, people might experience miracles, not only in conjunction with unexpected healings that might be attributed to spirits or to God, but also with respect to miraculous reversals of any kind of an undesired circumstance. Reading the narrative literature of the New Testament from this perspective, together with African scholars or untrained readers, one can discover the presence of the miraculous at centre stage in many pericopes that in Western exegesis are not considered miracle stories. Without getting into the complex issue of the definition of a miracle story at this point, I will point out just one example of an overlooked miracle story in Western exegesis. In Acts 4, the apostles Peter and John are strongly advised by the Sanhedrin not to preach publicly about Jesus any longer. Peter and his group are quite disturbed and pray to God that they might receive the ability to continue their public preaching. This results in a miracle after a prayer for "signs and wonders": "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:29–30). After the prayer, the place where they are meeting is shaken. And they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and speak the word of God boldly (4:31).

In my understanding, from the ancient Mediterranean perspective, there can be no doubt that this episode narrates a miraculous event, in a form shared with other narratives of the biblical text, for example the healing miracle

19 Bediako 1995, 252.

stories of the New Testament.²⁰ In the above-mentioned episode, the initially imposed order to remain speechless was reversed by a hidden act (of God) after the prayer to God, causing the Holy Spirit to enter the implorers and reverse the initial lack of speech; they begin to speak the word of God boldly.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, this story is generally missing in exegetical handbooks on miracle stories.²¹ This omission is due to the definition of miracle and of miracle stories that are informed by modern categories and life experiences. Such an outsider perspective inevitably leads to a distortion of the ancient material. New Testament exegesis still has much to learn from the insights and methodological suggestions discussed in ethnology, which is concerned with the academic exploration of manifestations of other cultures.

Concerning West African Bible readings, however, a note of caution is in need. Here I agree in particular with the South African theologian Tinyiko Maluleke who has raised a similar concern.²² There are indeed certain close affinities between African cultures and ancient Mediterranean cultures, especially when it comes to the experience of spirits and miracles. These occasional encyclopaedic – in a semiotic sense of the word – overlaps do at times allow for new insights into the cultural universes of antiquity. But these affinities do not constitute *identities*. Therefore, it would be problematic to assume a general hermeneutical privilege of African readings of the Bible. In addition, African perspectives do not preclude misinterpretations and abuses of the Bible.²³

A case in point is an interpretation of Matthew 18:18 that I witnessed in 2010 when visiting a neo-Pentecostal Ghanaian migrant church with university students in Hamburg. The preacher read the passage: “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” As visitors and cultural outsiders, we were surprised by the interpretation given by the Ghanaian preacher. He interpreted “loosing” in the context of reversing curses from envious family members in Ghana against believers in the church in Hamburg. According to the preacher, it was due to these curses that the believers were not successful in Germany. He admonished them therefore to pray back the curses to Ghana “in the powerful name of Jesus.” He added, “If you get a phone call next week informing you that your auntie or your father has suddenly died, don’t be surprised.” The preacher

20 Cf. Kahl 1994.

21 This holds true also for the Compendium of Early Christian Miracle Stories, despite the claim of the editors that all miracle stories in the New Testament and of Early Christianity were considered in the compendium: Zimmermann 2013.

22 Cf. Maluleke 1999, 210–9; Maluleke 2000, 193–212.

23 Cf. Dickson 1991, 141.

obviously implied that those who allegedly had sent the curses would be killed spiritually in the name of Jesus – a case of spiritual killing by Christians, taking place in Germany.

To arrive at such a problematic interpretation of the verse, the biblical proof text was first isolated from its context and then re-contextualised within the traditional encyclopedia of the preacher and his audience, with Jesus perceived in terms of traditional spirits like Mami Wata who can both enhance and destroy life. West African scholars of religion have described this kind of spiritual killing as a new trend in the subregion, labelling it neo-prophetic.²⁴

2. Afua Kuma: Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises

Afua Kuma was an illiterate farmwoman and midwife from the Kwahu mountains in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. She was known for her ability to create extemporaneously, and at times for hours on end, songs and praises for Jesus. She did so in her mother tongue Twi, claiming it was possible due to divine inspiration.

In her songs and praises, she would use traditional ‘chiefly’ titles for Jesus. The anthropologist and Catholic theologian John Kirby recorded her performances in the 1970s. He published some of her songs and praises in both Twi and English translations in 1981. Some additional material that was lost and recovered, was published in 2022.²⁵

For the following sample, I have selected verses that introduce Jesus as *life saviour* or giver of life. Here, Jesus is presented as a powerful divine agent capable of quenching all sorts of needs among rural people, especially pertaining to the protection and sustenance of life.

All-powerful Jesus,
who engages in marvellous deeds (...)
Jesus, you have saved (*wagyɛ*) the poor,
Who brightens up our faces.²⁶

24 Cf. Omenyo and Atiemo 2006, 55–68.

25 Jesus of the Deep Forest. Songs and Praises of Afua Kuma, ed. Jon P. Kirby (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1981) [Twi and English versions], cf. now: Kirby, *The Surprising African Jesus. The Lost Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022.

26 Kirby 1981, 5.

(Jesus), the sick are waiting for medicine (*aduru: antidote*)
 O Jesus, you have swallowed death
 And every kind of disease
 To give us rest.²⁷

Chief of lawyers, to whom we bring our complaints,
 You stand at the court and defend the poor (...)
 You are the breeze that makes us prosper,
 The wind that blows on us,
 And we gather money on the ground in the morning.²⁸

You are the one who has life from day to day (*daa nkwa*; Kirby: eternal life)
 And are the source of flowing waters.
 It is you who brings success to young men,
 And we go before you holding the Bible.²⁹

Jesus Christ, you are the fountain of life (*nkwa*).³⁰

Jesus blockades the road of death
 With wisdom and fear.³¹

He is God the provider (*Onyankopon Amponyinam*)
 Who has medicine (*aduru: antidote*) for hunger.³²

With great gratitude we come before Jesus
 The one who gives us life from day to day (*daa nkwa*; Kirby: everlasting life).³³
 (...) The first-born child who knows death's antidote (*aduru*).³⁴

The famine has become severe
 Let us go and tell Jesus!
 He is the one who,
 When he raises his hands,

27 Kirby 1981, 11.

28 Kirby 1981, 12.

29 Kirby 1981, 12.

30 Kirby 1981, 13.

31 Kirby 1981, 19.

32 Kirby 1981, 27.

33 Kirby 1981, 30.

34 Kirby 1981, 31.

Gives even our enemies their share,
 And our brothers bring head-pads
 To carry the food. (...)
 He knows all our needs.
 He is the fertile forest-land.³⁵

Jesus, come,
 For you are stronger than our enemies.(...)
 Be at peace and have no fear,
 For Jesus will come and deliver (*agye*) you.³⁶

Let us listen to the word of God,
 Therein is life (*nkwa*)
 Jesus has the spring of life (*nkwa*) (...)
 He gives salvation of life (*nkwaagye*) to you and me.³⁷

When we meet Jesus
 He has tied together both sickness and death
 And cast them into the sea.
 This is the reason the nations rejoice
 And the people are happy.³⁸

3. Salvation as Prosperity

In much of West Africa, posters and billboards of Pentecostal preachers publicly promise the fulfilment of the need for 'financial increase'. As such, they bear witness to a belief that financial success is a spiritual matter. The expectation that God might grant business-success is part of the 'salvation-package'. Accordingly, Matthew 6:33, a prominent verse among Christians in the sub-region, is memorised in a version slightly different from the written English translation: "Seek you first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and *everything* (in the Bible translations we read the correct phrase "all these things," referring to the items mentioned in the preceding verses, like food, drink, clothing) "shall be added unto you." In this instance, as elsewhere, the

35 Kirby 1981, 39.

36 Kirby 1981, 40.

37 Kirby 1981, 43.

38 Kirby 1981, 45.

common reader's expectation overrides the written text. This is *not* simply due to oral traditions of memorisation or illiteracy, but rather to a deliberate, forced interpretation. Daniel Kolawole Olukoya, general overseer of Nigerian-based Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, in his *Prayer and Deliverance Bible* comments on Matthew 6:33: "The Bible terms riches as 'all other things' which should be added to the true seeker."³⁹ Exegetically and theologically, I would strongly contest the legitimacy of this reading as an expression of an uncritical imposition of meaning onto the verse due to the arbitrary isolation from its literary context and its subsequent re-contextualisation in a West African frame of reference informed by a particular blend of traditional thinking with modern capitalist ideology.

In any case, in this perspective, a *blessed* Christian life is one marked by prosperity. This understanding of the *essence* of the Gospel is clearly brought to expression by neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers. Along with Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, I criticise here the "sort of prosperity gospel (...) that promotes materialism, sometimes of the kind that Jesus attacks in the Gospels."⁴⁰ The following may serve as an example.

Matthew Addae-Mensah, founder and leader of Gospel Light International Church with its headquarters in Accra, writes:

Beloved, no matter your situation, God's power can make you somebody. God wants you to become great and rich. (...) Friends, relatives and society may not *respect* you if you are not being fruitful and multiplying in *every* aspect of your life. Get connected to the *power of God* and see the difference! If you are childless because of infertility, *challenge* God. His Word says He will have to respect you and make you fruitful and multiply. If you are *financially* or spiritually barren, you will not earn respect among your peers. Apply the power of God (...). Prosperity comes as a result of seeking the LORD diligently (...). God will make you prosper. Poverty abounds in Christians' lives because we have rejected the Word of God.⁴¹

Addae-Mensah interprets here 1 Sam 2:8: "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and he hath set the world upon them" (KJV). According to Addae-Mensah, it is God's will that believers be prosperous; poverty is against

39 Olukoya 2010, 22.

40 Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 107.

41 Addae-Mensah 2000, 20–1 (*italics are mine*).

the will of God. Christians are poor because they have “rejected the Word of God.” Believers are called to “challenge” God, to claim the God’s promises over their life. It is due to a connection to the “power of God” that the life of the believer can turn upside-down, i.e. from poverty to abundance, so that eventually they may be “respected” in society.

Widespread in neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in West Africa is a strong tendency to read the *entire* Bible with an individualistic and materialistic understanding of salvation as brought about by Christ. This belief and expectation are so strong that counter-indicative Biblical passages are typically glossed over or explained away. Prosperity preachers explicitly reject the traditional Western Christian understanding of Gospel as it has survived in the churches once founded by European missionaries. A Biblical passage informing this traditional understanding is, e.g. 1 John 2:15–16:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

According to Addae-Mensah, this passage is usually misinterpreted. His argumentation unfolds in the following way: The passage only warns of a “trust in this world,” not of a concern for material things, since the concern for clothing, living, food, job, etc. was also a concern for “things of the world.” These concerns are necessary for survival and for an existence in this world which God does not deny. As 3 John 2 clearly states – in Addae-Mensah’s perspective – God is in favour of the well-being and prosperity of the believer. Since there can be no contradictions in the Bible, it must be concluded that any interpretations that are critical of possessions and prosperity are false. Rather, 1 John 2:15–16 should be read in line with 3 John 2, as understood by Addae-Mensah which, however, is also a gross misrepresentation of the verse. This interpretation is only possible due to an ignorance of the original Greek which here reads εὐδοῦσθαί which, when taken in context, is nothing more than a common and general greeting or well-wish to the addressee. Literally it means “being on a good path,” and should be rendered as “that things might go on well with you.”

4. Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics

This analysis has also been an exercise in intercultural biblical hermeneutics. Such hermeneutics tries to critically interrelate diverse biblical interpretations

from different regions and contexts. Of course, any interpretation engages the biblical text in an intercultural way since the ancient textual world is never fully identical to a given present experience and understanding of reality. Intercultural biblical hermeneutics actually pushes for cognitive transgressions as various interpretations engage each other – on an equal standing. This can be quite irritating for a traditional understanding, let's say of critical exegesis, but it constitutes the ethical dimension of the academic interpretation of the Bible – allowing others to speak for themselves and to be taken seriously, not only the voices of the biblical writings that are at times silenced, but also the contemporary voices of readers from other regions of the world with particular experiences of life. The frictions caused by the correlation of contextual interpretations from the global South and the global North, from both the academic and popular levels, can, however, be productive. These frictions could lead to a more appropriate understanding of biblical writings in conjunction with a sharpened awareness of the fact that each and every interpretation of the Bible is context-bound and therefore of relative value. This also applies to Western exegesis.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to emphasise that much of contemporary West African biblical interpretation on both the academic and popular level is not interested in a spiritualised or otherworldly salvation. Its interests converge with the early Christian concern with a *spiritual shaping of reality* in the here and now. In basically all New Testament writings, expressions of salvation pertain to all dimensions of life, the physical, the psychic, the individual, and last but not least, the communal or relational. In the examples that I discussed here we can see some variation in the concern for a spiritual shaping of reality in Ghana:

- Afua Kuma's Jesus praises emphasise the *physical and communal needs* of rural people in the countryside that Jesus as *life saviour* is willing and able to fulfil;
- In much of neo-Pentecostal churches the focus is on physical lacks that Jesus is expected to overcome *for individuals to be successful* in life. We find this type of Gospel interpretation and preaching predominantly in the big cities. It seems to reflect modern and materialistic values.

Recent studies have, however, indicated some transformations taking place in the understanding of salvation in (neo-)Pentecostal circles. There is a growing awareness among Pentecostals of the need to also address communal, social and ecological challenges from the perspective of Gospel.

My Ghanaian colleagues Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng from Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Accra, have recently identified the following criterion for assessing the appropriateness of a given biblical interpretation in West Africa: It should be life enhancing for communities.⁴²

Adhering to this notion, I suggest the following understanding of Gospel-informed New Testament interpretations: The Gospel is the good news of the God of justice turning mercifully to all people with a special concern for liberating and including those excluded from full participation in life and community.

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42 Cf. Amevenku and Boaheng 2021, 108.

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GOSPEL-ACTS



NCHEGHARI: An Intercultural Understanding of Μετάνοια in Mark 1:15

Stanley Ekwugha

Introduction

The Kingdom of God in Mark entails μετάνοια (repentance). In the Hellenistic world, μετά (beyond or after) and νοῦς (mind, thought) have the connotation of afterthought. It could have a simple, profane meaning of change of mind. Hence, μετάνοια could also denote the meaning of *umdenken* (rethink).¹ This repentance as a concept cuts across cultures and religions. From textual analysis to practical input, an assessment of repentance as a *sine qua non* for the longed-for Kingdom of God is of central importance in this work. It is examined within the ambience of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God as a call-response dialectic. Added to it is the belief in the Gospel. From the expression, μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ (repent and believe in the Gospel); it could be interpreted that belief in the Gospel is an integral aspect of repentance, making the conjunctive καὶ epexegetical. Thus, repentance is implicit when one begins to believe. To believe in the Gospel brings about appreciation, acceptance and emulation of the message.

In the Igbo culture in Nigeria,² repentance is called *ncheghari*, which could mean a change of mind or perception. It is also akin to the Hebrew שׁוּב as a mental journey. This work looks at Jesus' call to repentance in Mark 1:15 and its possible application to the Nigerian context. Μετάνοια cannot be applied to a Nigerian audience unless the concept of repentance as *ncheghari* is first of all brought to bear. This way, a kind of intercultural (ancient Hebrew and Igbo) dialogue would add more meaning to the use of the word "repentance" in Mark 1:15. Other passages in the Gospel of Mark could be looked at through the lens of μετάνοια/*ncheghari* as a change of mindset.

Several recent events in Nigeria present a crisis situation calling for a change of heart among Nigerians. Nigeria is then used in this work as a case study of a

¹ Cf. Gnllka 1978, 67.

² The Igbos are predominantly found in the South-eastern region of Nigeria in a geographical longitude of 6° and 8° east and a latitude of 5° and 7° north (cf. Ekwuru 2009, 21).

nation in need of repentance. Going further, the possibility of a national consciousness and a repentance will understand the time of crisis as *καιρός*. The call to repentance in Mark's Gospel could then fashion an *ad rem* message for Nigerians in particular, and Africans in general today.

The trio of appreciation, acceptance and emulation serves as a rostrum upon which *ncheghari* as a cultural equivalence to *μετάνοια* is appraised. An intercultural exegesis should involve a certain kind of interplay between the world of the text and the world of the present-day reader. Some scholars hold that the goal of every biblical exegesis must be that of orthopraxis.³ In this way, a bridge is constructed between exegesis and pastoral theology. In other words, how can a method of exegesis be developed that is both faithful to the text and pragmatically significant? Is a lay reader of the Bible able to grasp the terminologies employed in a particular narrative? Can those terminologies inspire him/her to a new perspective in life? Finally, could this perspective be helpful towards a holistic comprehension of the given narrative? All these are put into consideration in this work. Certain keywords used in this biblical passage such as Kingdom of God, repentance and belief will be contextually interpreted. It is in the light of this that I will examine Mark 1:15 so as to understand the cultural milieu and socio-political situation of the author, as well as the choice of terminologies used in this proclamation of Jesus. Next to this is a brief presentation of Nigeria as a nation in crisis and therefore in need of repentance. Only in this way can an intercultural bridge be built to join the world of the present reader to the world of the author. This then creates an appropriate interface for a contextual pragmatic study of the text.

1. Mark's Cultural Milieu

The inspiration of a biblical text is not only divine but also environmental. As a voice coming from a specific point in time, God speaks to the author(s) through surrounding events. These events are the anonymous 'co-authors' of a given text. Mark is no exception. The apocalyptic section, namely chapter 13, has always played an important role in modern dating of this biblical book. This section reflects the conquest of Jerusalem by Titus between 67 and 70 CE.⁴ Even here, scholars remain divided whether Mark was written before⁵ or after⁶ the fall of Jerusalem.

3 Zimmermann 2021, 20–26; Kaiser 1991, 16; Zehnder 2023, 17.

4 Cf. Donahue and Harrington 2002, 1.

5 Cf. Guelich 1989, xxxi; Farrer 1951, 365.

6 Cf. Kümmel 1975, 98; Gnllka 1978, 35; Ernst 1981, 23.

Another thing to note here is the place of writing. Right from the beginning of modern biblical scholarship, possible places include Syria,⁷ Galilee,⁸ the Decapolis,⁹ etc., all of which have been disputed by Ernst.¹⁰ The theory that Rome could be the possible place of writing has gained more ground than others. One argument in this direction is the idiosyncratic Latinism in explaining some Greek words (4:21; 5:9,15; 6:27, 37; 7:4; 12:14; 15:16). According to Guelich, such “redactional comments would make more sense for an audience in Rome than one in the East for whom the Greek expression would hardly have needed the Roman/Latin explanation.”¹¹

Upholding a dating shortly after 70 CE, I accept the dating of Mark during the time of Vespasian, the last in the year of the four emperors, and the founder of the Flavian dynasty. This means that Mark 13 could be either pre-Markan material or a form of *vaticinium ex eventu*. The Christians could not have been exempt from the tension that characterised this era.¹² Their persecution by Nero was acute, especially after the inferno of 64 CE. When Nero committed suicide, Vespasian ascended to the throne and his son Titus besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.¹³ These events could have been understood by the Christians as an indication of the end time.¹⁴ Though nothing is known of the persecution of Christians by Vespasian, Josephus reported that he dealt cruelly with the Jews in Rome owing to what he encountered in Galilee with the zealots, especially led by one John of Gischala. During this time also, the difference between the Jews and the Christians was not noticeable to outsiders since the Christians also shared things in common with the Jews such as the observance of the Torah and the avoidance of the pagan cult of the Roman Empire.¹⁵ Hence, there was the possibility of not exculpating Christians from involvement in the Jewish revolt. This could be compared to the expulsion of the Jews from Italy during the reign of Emperor Claudius in 49 CE – the edict cites the reason for the decree as *impulsore Chresto*. It could also be conjectured that the Romans were haunted by the spirit of the dead Nero in his successors until Vespasian. On the other hand, there was an underlying injustice in the perceived golden age of Rome. The so-called absolute peace of the time was

7 Cf. Vielhauer 1975, 347.

8 Cf. Marxsen 1969, 64–6.

9 Cf. Schulz 1967, 9.

10 Cf. Ernst 1981, 22.

11 Guelich 1989, xxx.

12 Cf. van Kooten 2007, 206.

13 Cf. Josephus Flavius 2003, 651–925.

14 Cf. Hurtado 2003, 312.

15 Cf. Frey 2022, 858. As van Kooten notes, the golden house project was irritating to both the Jews and the Christians (cf. van Kooten 2007, 223).

achieved through violence and bloodshed. For the elite it was a golden age, but for those in the lower strata of the society, where most Christians belonged, it was a peace soaked in blood, fearful and horrifying, and achieved through conquest motivated by expansionism and control.

At this point, a possible literary milieu begins to emerge; Mark was written at a time of political turmoil. The death of Nero created a climate of uncertainty. Together with the Jews, the Christians suffered threat from the Roman authority. Thirdly, the underlying injustice as a result of the social stratification of the empire could be anything but a reflection of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, the messianic claim of the Christians could have been received with hostility by the Jews. Hence, the Marcan community suffered threats both from the Romans and from the Jews who viewed them as a heretical group (13:9–13). What we see here is a community that is Jewish in identity, yet distinct in its messianic identification in Jesus. Pressed between excommunication by the Jews and imperial brutality though not focused explicitly on the Christians, a theological improvisation of an alternative society was needed. This society is the Kingdom of God. Jesus' teaching in Mark thus unmasks the errors in the imperial society.¹⁶ Mark could therefore be a critique of the Roman society and be read and interpreted through this lens. The alternative society proposed is not really antithetical to the imperial kingdom. Instead, it transcends it since belonging to both kingdoms is not a contradiction. The proclamation of Jesus, therefore, centres on the acceleration of this alternative society that could only be realised through *μετάνοια*.

2. Elements for Exegetical Consideration

The intercultural exegesis presented will focus on reader-oriented selection,¹⁷ selecting thus those words that would be central to a discussion on the theme of repentance: the concept of the Kingdom of God and belief in the Gospel. These will then enable us to more fully understand the call to repentance in Mark 1:15.

¹⁶ Cf. Maloney 2004, 59.

¹⁷ E.g. for Barclay, three dominant words in this passage are "the Gospel," "repentance," and "belief" (cf. Barclay 2001, 24–6).

2.1 Dawn of the Kingdom of God

The proclamation of John the Baptist centres on repentance, while Jesus preaches about the Kingdom of God as an alternative society. Whether this kingdom is here in this world or is other-worldly can only be contextually determined. Jesus begins by saying that the time (καιρός) is completed (1:15). Καιρός is not a measured duration, but is a specific time. That πεπλήρωται is in the perfect tense could mean that the kingdom is already here, and its passive voice could be a divine passive, meaning a time fixed by God himself.¹⁸ It is a new era not in terms of duration but of quality in which God offers mankind salvation through the proclamation of Jesus.¹⁹ Thus, the πεπλήρωται context suggests that the Kingdom of God is already present.

Βασιλεία as a concept entails both action and setting, hence stability and movement. Thus the verb ἤγγικεν, which could mean to draw near, suggests that the kingdom lies in the future. The context of πεπλήρωται suggesting arrival and the verb ἤγγικεν denoting nearness made Guelich describe 1:15 as “an apparent syntactical contradiction.”²⁰ That πεπλήρωται and ἤγγικεν are coupled, however, captures the meaning of both the present and future.²¹ It could therefore be interpreted both as having already arrived and about to dawn. Scholars abound who adopt this double sense of present and future. For example, Guelich posits that the kingdom has come into history.²² Its beginning is a hidden one and can be perceived only by faith.²³ Yet, it encompasses both the present and the ἔσχατος,²⁴ both instances that can be found in Mark. For Ambrozic, ἤγγικεν comes from the Semitic root בָּרַךְ meaning nearness and arrival. This is clearly seen in 10:37. As Donahue and Harrington posit, “Mark’s Jesus announces and enacts God’s reign as beginning now in his ministry, but as to be perfected only with the return of the Son of Man.”²⁵ The messianic secrecy of the kingdom in Jesus lies in this hidden nature with its climax in the centurion’s confession in 15:39.²⁶

In Jesus’ proclamation (1:35–39), healing (1:31; 3:1–6; 5:25–34; 6:53–56; 7:24–37), exorcisms (1:21–28; 3:19b–30; 5:1–20; 9:14–29), and nature miracles

18 Cf. Guelich 1989, 43.

19 Cf. Ernst 1981, 49.

20 Guelich 1989, 44.

21 For the Kingdom of God as something in the future, cf. Mark 9:11; 11:10, 13; 14:25; 15:43.

22 Cf. Guelich 1989, 43.

23 Cf. Haenchen 1966, 73.

24 Cf. Gnlika 1978, 67.

25 Donahue and Harrington 2002, 71. Cf. also Guelich 1989, 44.

26 For the messianic secrecy, cf. Maloney 2004, 8.

(4:35–41; 5:21–24, 35–43; 8:1–10), the Kingdom of God becomes manifest here and now. But in the apocalyptic discourse in Mark 13, as well as in the prophecy of drinking the cup in the coming kingdom in 14:25, the Kingdom of God is yet to arrive. The assurance that some will not test death before the arrival of the kingdom, as well as the dos and don'ts for entering into it, suggest its proximity (9:1). Characters of the Kingdom of God from both ends of the pole – present and future – are captured in the parables of the growth (4:1–34). In the dialectic of already and not yet, the Kingdom of God is present in history in a personal hidden way, but will be fully realised in the world at the end of time.

The Kingdom of God in Mark is to be found in Jesus himself, whose appearance on the stage marks its beginning as his teachings and miracles are indices of this kingdom. Mark's community could include his disciples, since his Gospel begins with the call of the disciples (1:21–28; 3:13–19); it could also include the crowd that became his disciples by listening to him and following him (3:7–12, 20, 31–35). By being sent forth to preach (κηρύσσειν) and to cast off demons (ἐκβάλλειν τὰ δαιμόνια) (3:15), the disciples too are building the Kingdom of God in the missionary enterprise. This kingdom, though an alternative society, is not a parallel government, but permeates the already existing society with the aim of gradually converting it to God's Kingdom.

2.2 Repentance and Belief in the Gospel

The kingdom that dawns in history and aims toward eschatological fulfilment entails the cooperation of divine initiative and human effort.²⁷ For the further realisation of the kingdom, humans are therefore called to repentance and, consequently, belief in the Gospel.

The verb to believe (πιστεύω) occurs several times in Mark (1:15; 5:36; 9:23, 24, 42; 11:23, 24, 32; 13:21; 15:32). According to Donahue and Harrington, "in the Bible 'faith' or 'belief' (πίστις) generally suggests not simply intellectual conviction but also trust and personal commitment, often with an orientation toward a threatening future."²⁸ The Gospel that the hearers of Jesus' proclamation are called to believe in is the Gospel of God (1:14). In the Old Testament, the gospel had to do with news of victory. In Pauline theology, it becomes everything about the life and death of Jesus as a saving mystery. It is in Mark that the term Gospel came to embrace the proclamation of Jesus himself, and at this time when

²⁷ Cf. Maloney 2004, 8.

²⁸ Donahue and Harrington 2002, 71.

it was still an oral proclamation.²⁹ The epexegetical καὶ that begins Mark 1:15 links this Gospel of God to the content of Jesus' proclamation, namely, the fullness of time, the dawn of the kingdom and the call to repentance. Hence, the Gospel that begins as a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies (vv.2–3) is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who then calls his audience to believe in the same Gospel (himself). He becomes the true evangelist of the Kingdom of God through his person, teaching and deeds, culminating in his death and resurrection. Thus, 1:1,15 could be seen as a programmatic introduction to the entire corpus.

If the Kingdom of God is to be identified with Jesus who is the content and its herald, we can then say that John prepares the people for the coming kingdom especially in his call to repentance in 1:4, and his pointing to the “greater one” in 1:7–8. This “greater one” announces also the dawn of the kingdom but presents repentance as a necessary condition for entering into it. This theme is central in the Old Testament teaching and is the main thrust of the prophetic callings (Deut 4:15–31, Isa 6:10, 53, Jonah 3:1,10, Hos 11:1, Ezek 18:21–22 etc). Here, the understanding of the word is שׁוּב meaning to return to the beginning. Placing the call to repentance within a proclamation context, Mark suggests that it most likely carries this prophetic input of שׁוּב and connotes the call to return to God with all one's being. It is a kind of journey in which the person realises that he/she is going in the wrong direction and must therefore turn back. According to Gnllka, “Ziel der Wendung auf dem Weg, der also bis dahin ein falscher war, ist Gott, weil die Gottesherrschaft hier all Bezirke des menschlichen Lebens des einzelnen, den privaten und öffentlichen, den ethischen und politischen, umgreift.”³⁰ However, this journey is only a mental journey. Thus, Jesus called his listeners to turn from their wayward ways in total surrender to God. It is here that both the Hebrew שׁוּב and the Greek μετάνοια converge. Μετάνοια is thus not simply a change of mind,³¹ but also an interior transformation of the believing person or a radical turning away from sin towards God.

29 The identification of a written document with the Gospel genre seems to date back shortly before the Didache since there are copious quotations in this document (Did 1:8; 11:3–4; 15:4) similar to Matthew's Gospel that bear the name εὐαγγέλιον. Cf. Kelhoffer 2004, 17.

30 Gnllka 1978, 67.

31 Cf. Donahue and Harrington 2002, 71; Barclay 2001, 26.

3. Μετάνοια as *Ncheghari*

Among the Igbos of Nigeria, the word that translates repentance is *ncheghari*. In the Igbo language and culture, it is made up of two parts, a main word and a suffix. *Uche* is a substantive or noun that means thought, mind, opinion, will, view, perception, etc. Its verbal form is *iche uche*, meaning to think. The suffix *ghari* could mean to repeat something, most of the time, however, in a corrective way. It could, therefore, mean righting the wrong. In this sense, *ncheghari* as a noun that derives from righting the wrong in thinking could mean changing the way we think. It has to do with the change of mindset or looking at realities through a different lens. Much more is at stake than the more literal 'changing of one's mind', 'regret' or sorrow, of μετάνοειν. *Ncheghari* could never be complete without *nchighari* meaning to turn around. *Nchighari* is a physical activity that has to do with a change of direction. It could be passive when it is carried out by one being on another like controlling a horse. It could also be active when one out of volition or compulsion decides to turn around. This later context dovetails with our discussion. It is not enough to change one's mindset. A corresponding change of direction is also needed.

Today, many Igbos have lost the true meaning of *ncheghari*. It is now associated with Pentecostal phenomena. It now distinguishes the Pentecostals from those outside of their circle, including the mainstream Christians. For example, one's decision to stop wearing Brazilian hair and to adopt natural hair is a typical sign of repentance or *ncheghari*. It could also be the case when I stop wearing skinny dresses and go for something more loose fitting in order not to expose my body curves. A man who stops listening to or playing secular music and concentrates on Gospel songs is considered a 'repented' man. However, the truth is that this does not convey the original meaning of the word in the Igbo language. It is the loss of this understanding of repentance that has made some Igbos see repentance in terms of externals that do not touch the mindset. That is why many people adopt these external features of Pentecostal repentance, yet they do not transform society.

The exterior display of repentance by the Nigerian Pentecostals falls short of the meaning of μετάνοια. Their *ncheghari* is not complete because it lacks the aspect of *nchighari*. This form of piety is purely personal and exterior and hence hardly translates into action, and this impedes the realisation of the kingdom. In other words, there is no proper interior transformation without a rethink, and this rethink must be put into practice. Faith is thus both an epistemological issue (a mental acceptance of a proposition) and work. Hence, in μετάνοια one finds an amalgam of theory and practice. It involves the whole of the human person called to love God with all his heart, mind and strength.

The entire Gospel of Mark can be interpreted in the light of the Igbo concept of *ncheghari*. As a teacher *per excellence* (12:19, 32), Jesus engages in 'resetting' the minds of his listeners, who are his students, to enable them to see the realities of their time through the lens of God. His audience includes his disciples (10:10–11) and the crowd (10:1; 11:18; 12:37)³² on one side and the opposing authorities consisting of the scribes,³³ Pharisees, chief priests and elders (11:27; 14:43, 53) who are sometimes afraid of the crowd (11:18, 32; 14:2). His 'mind resetting' begins with this last group as he eats with tax collectors and sinners; he even explains why he did so. His nearness to sinners is justified with the analogy of the sick and the healer (2:15–17). The climax is the cleansing of the temple. A house of prayer for all nations that has been turned into a den of robbers must be cleansed (11:15–19). Cleansing the temple is therefore a symbolic presentation of μετάνοια aimed at rediscovering the original purpose of the temple as a house of prayer.

He taught his disciples that the Kingdom of God as an alternative society does not parallel the Roman Empire with rulers lording it over their subjects (10:42); hence, the argument among the disciples on who is the greatest. This false imagery needs to be corrected by Jesus Christ by equating greatness with service and being the last even to the point of being childlike (9:33–37; 10:13–16, 35–45). Children at the time of Jesus, though loved and cherished for the sake of continuing the lineage, were like slaves without power and status, and possibly unable to defend themselves.³⁴ Such will be the attitude of those who will be able to enter the kingdom. Another aspect of the Roman Kingdom is the oppressive power of wealth. To the surprise of his audience, Jesus teaches that wealth could even be an obstacle to the realisation of Kingdom of God. To become rich in a zero-economy system, some people must suffer loss.³⁵ Hence, the good use of wealth consists in placing it at the service of the poor and the disadvantaged (10:17–31). That is the μετάνοια that the rich man could not achieve.

So captivating is the reaction of Peter at Caesarea Philippi as Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, showing Peter as a man in need of μετάνοια. Jesus' rebuke automatically brings this about. His diagnosis is straight to the point; Peter sets his mind not on the things of God but on human things (8:33). The

32 Except in 15:11.15, the crowd in Mark is part of the discipleship as they call him teacher (9:17) and are always at the side of the Twelve (10:32.46). Sometimes they argue with the authorities who are the established opponents of Jesus (9:14–15).

33 There is also an instance of a scribe being gentle and friendly with Jesus (cf. 12:28–34) meriting him to be closer to the Kingdom of God.

34 Cf. Maloney 2004, 61.

35 Cf. Maloney 2004, 62.

human mind abhors the cross, while the divine mind notices its necessity for salvation. These two ways of seeing reality have causes and consequences. First of all, the human vision of reality is through the lens offered by the devil and, anyone that falls victim of it is already an offspring of Satan.³⁶ The divine vision of reality is as a result of Jesus' teaching. The consequence of the human lens is the rejection of the cross and the denial of Jesus and his proclamation. For the human mind, the demands made by the Kingdom of God are a threat to self-preservation. Repentance as 'mind resetting' then involves putting on the lens of God, so as to embrace the message of Jesus and believing that true life consists not in self-preservation but in laying that very life down for the sake of Jesus and his proclamation. If Peter's confession of Jesus' messiahship is vicarious, his reaction here is also the same. It shows that the disciples have not yet understood the type of messiah Jesus is. His is not a political messianism which sees the cross as a scandal.³⁷ The disciples as well as the crowd are not only to allow Jesus to face his fate, they too are also to expect the way of the cross as an essential part of discipleship.³⁸ Hence, the indispensability of death as a means to enter into glory needs to be re-emphasised (8:34–38; 10:32–34). In Jesus' teachings to each of these sets of people, the *μετάνοια* motif is detectable inasmuch as he first sheds light on their ignorance and then offers the right teaching, the corrective lens.

4. Nigeria: A Nation in Need of *Μετάνοια*

The situation of the imperial Rome at the time of the writing of Mark could be likened to the present reality of Nigeria. First of all, the society is socially stratified creating a contrast of scandalous opulence and abject poverty. The upper class systematically exploits the lower leading to the concentration of the nation's wealth in the hands of the few. It is a typical case of Oxfam's economy for the 1%.³⁹ The situation worsens exponentially, in the sense that the rich always employ the tactics of divide and rule. The downtrodden are usually set against one another through identity politics based on tribe and religion. In this situation, it is difficult to form a united front in fighting for a distributive justice.

³⁶ Cf. Maloney 2004, 59.

³⁷ Cf. Gnlika 1978, 18.

³⁸ Cf. Gnlika 1978, 17–9.

³⁹ Cf. Serry and Arenda 2014, 61.

Driven by the quest for survival, many Nigerians have resorted to corruption. With the situation at hand, it is close to impossible to succeed in Nigeria without compromising. Those who would be the best for the country are seen as threats and therefore avoided, while the mediocre assume the mantle of leadership. Thus, those who have ideas do not have power and those in power do not have ideas. Democracy in Nigeria is a travesty. Elections are rigged through vote buying, intimidation, ballot box snatching and the bribing of electoral offices and the judiciary.

The level of inflation in Nigeria has recently accelerated, resulting in biting poverty in the land. Video clips abound where many Nigerians are scrambling for spoiled food items already dumped in the bins. It is in this same country where the minimum wage of 60,000 Naira is still debatable, while each lawmaker goes home each month with a whopping sum of 18,418,000 Naira.

Religious leaders are also cushioning the politicians. Prayer houses have become campaign grounds. During the time of electioneering, candidates (even those with questionable pasts) are anointed by some men of God. The huge donations made to the Churches and mosques are enough to wipe away their sins. In this way, religious leaders also contribute to the exploitation of the masses. The society then is anything but a semblance of the Kingdom of God on earth. The prerequisite for the actualisation of this Kingdom of God in Nigeria is *μετάνοια* understood through the lens of *ncheghari*.

Conclusion

Repentance in Mark is geared towards the realisation of the Kingdom of God. It has to do with a change of mindset as well as lifestyle by seeing realities through the lens of God. The Hebrew שׁוּב and the Greek *μετάνοια* find a confluence of understanding in the Igbo *ncheghari*. Nigeria is presented here as a case study of a nation in need of *μετάνοια*. Such a nation is exactly the opposite of what the Kingdom of God should be. To create an alternative society that corresponds to the Markan image of the Kingdom of God, the people of Nigeria need preaching on *μετάνοια*. It is not enough to preach on *μετάνοια* to the people; knowledge of the audience is also necessary. It is here that the concept of *ncheghari* should be brought to the fore. There is a need for a national consciousness and a change of mind. There have been indices of this, as can be seen in the EndSars Protest of October 2020 as well as the Obedient Movement shortly before the 2023 election. In both cases, the Nigerian youths for the first time, put religion and tribe aside and fought for a sane society.

The leaders should know that their accumulation of wealth meant for all Nigerians does not guarantee the happiness of all, and that such exclusivity breeds revolution and turmoil. The masses should learn not to compromise even when it is difficult for them, bearing in mind that a short-term solution is no solution at all. The mind should be reset regarding the choice of a candidate in which neither tribe nor religious affiliation should play any role since the political consequence of our collective decision does not discriminate. Pastors of souls should also experience μετάνοια knowing that any move they make with the politicians that ends up hurting their flock contradicts the very essence of their vocation. Looking at the present mess in which Nigeria is enmeshed, the new Nigeria project seems impossible. But learning from the Gospel of Mark that turmoil is only the beginning of a birth pang, one should be convinced that he that endures will be saved (13:13). The gloomy situation points to a light in the immediate beyond.

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Luke 4 and the Reader Portrait in the Dura Synagogue (3rd Century): Rejoicing in the Common Citizenship of the Planet

Barbara Crostini

Introduction

The definition of “a world in crisis,” chosen as the title of this project for which this essay was written, is very fitting as a description of today’s global unrest. The world is sliding into an ever-deeper condition of disruption and war. The climate crisis, accented by apocalyptic predictions and thwarted by political propaganda, is compounded by more immediate emergencies such as the outpouring of refugees from areas affected by ongoing conflicts, including Africa, Ukraine, and, since the attacks of 7 October 2023, Palestine. Circumstances such as these give rise to a mood of pessimism. Where can we find salvation? What message of hope can be delivered to a world in such dire need of it?

In this paper, I attempt a definition of the Christian contours of a message of salvation by travelling back in time to 3rd-century Roman Syria. That socio-political context will serve as the framework for intercultural exegesis. While it is important to avoid anachronistically interpreting the past according to present categories and expectations, moving to a time close to the beginnings of Christianity allows the vividness of the message of salvation to shine through. Moreover, recent studies of late Roman history describe this period in ways that evoke close parallels with our contemporary situation. Not only were wars and conflicts the order of the day – and the organisation and administration of the Roman army key to the stability of the Empire – but there were also other factors such as pandemics and climate change that impacted on the socio-economic realities of populations and governments.¹ Similarly, the 2020 Covid pandemic and the constant emergency of global warming due to gas emissions have troubled contemporary society globally. Christians ask themselves what kind of impact they can have in such a world. Looking back at what ideas were foregrounded in the formative period of Christianity in the

¹ Harper 2018.

3rd century, we can perhaps offer some suggestions on how to bring hope for a better future for our world.

I will argue herein that the jubilee proclamation in Isaiah (Isa 61:1–2 and 58:6) was adopted as the centrepiece of Luke’s proclamation of the Messiah’s work (Luke 4:18–19) within the broader programme of the salvific message expected of Christ the Redeemer. I bring concrete evidence of this proclamation not from texts, but from an image painted on the walls of the synagogue at Dura Europos c. 240 CE.

Dura Europos was a town on the river Euphrates in the Roman province of Syria-Coele at the Eastern edge of the Roman Empire. It had been under Roman domination since the end of the second century.² This painted wall panel depicts the reader of a scroll (Fig. 1). Comparing this image to the historical context of the beginning of the 3rd century CE, I will demonstrate confluences of Greco-Roman with Jewish-Christian thought in shaping a positive message for a people beset by problems not unlike our own: war, disease, and climate change. I will try to demonstrate that the convergence of political responses and religious attitudes to salvation ensured that the promises of redemption were perceived as real and that the message of salvation was effective for many.

1. Crisis in the Roman Empire

Roman decline began at the beginning of the 3rd century, even if its “fall” only gradually developed over the following couple of centuries. While scores of writers have asked themselves the question why, Kyle Harper’s book, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*, brings new evidence to bear on this age-old question. Rather than look at the failures of administration or leadership of the ruling class, or of the army for reasons of disastrous strategic choices, Harper includes nature in the picture. A threatening, difficult natural world placed stress on the huge territory of the Roman empire that had flourished under a regime of ideal weather known as the Roman Climate Optimum. Changing atmospheric conditions altered the climate for the worse after ca. 250 CE. As the sun grew paler and the earth colder, people took to worshipping Apollo as saviour from the ills these changes brought with them.³

² Baird 2018.

³ Harper 2018, 68.

There is no established, automatic correlation between changes in climate and epidemic outbreaks. Nonetheless, Harper notes that “the period we call late antiquity could be considered the age of pandemic disease.”⁴ The first occurrence was the Antonine Plague, named after the dynasty ruling the Roman Empire when it broke out in 165 CE.⁵ From Galen’s description of the symptoms, scholars used to consider this an outbreak of smallpox; but this conjecture has come under scrutiny thanks to more scientific methods for tracing diseases through DNA.⁶ Since statistical data is difficult both to gather and to evaluate for the ancient period, different estimates of the mortality rates exist according to which impact on demographics is reckoned.⁷ Scholars thus debate how much this mortality event could have caused the subsequent economic decline due to loss of manpower. In addition to economic impact, tales of painful and widespread death must have increased worry and spread panic in the population. What interests us here is that the origins of the outbreak were located in the Eastern parts of the empire, with the disease spreading westwards with the return of the armies of Lucius Verus from the Parthian campaign of 162–166 CE. As an inscription and some coin finds attest, the adoptive son of Antoninus Pius and brother of Marcus Aurelius had travelled precisely via Dura Europos on his march home.⁸ The ravages of illness were surely felt in the Mesopotamian region earlier than in Italy.

While most accounts jump directly from this first epidemic to the plague of Justinian which, starting from the 5th century, afflicted the Byzantine Empire for over two centuries,⁹ Kyle Harper also focusses on an intermediate unidentified pandemic called the plague of Cyprian, named after the bishop of Carthage who witnessed the event. Its effects are reported during the years 249 to 270 CE.¹⁰ Besides written testimonies, Harper cites material evidence such as the issue of coins to Apollo Salutaris for the aversion of the plague, and the finds of mass graves that attest to a quick one-time mortality event for a large number

4 Harper 2015, 223.

5 Harper 2018, 64–118; Harper 2015, 223; Duncan-Jones 1996 and 2018.

6 Newfield/Duggan/Poinar 2022 argue for a much more recent beginning for the variola virus that causes smallpox.

7 Bruun 2007, 204–5.

8 For the inscription see: <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/dura-parthian-victory-and-lucius-verus>. Ten coin finds are kept at the Yale University Art Gallery. See <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collection?query=Lucius+Verus+Dura>.

9 Little 2006.

10 Harper 2015, 224.

of people. Furthermore, these bodies were covered in lime for sanitation and hastily buried in communal pits found in the Roman catacombs.¹¹

Christian responses to this outbreak of disease give us a glimpse of how solidarity within the community succeeded in building up a network of mutual aid. Rodney Stark goes as far as envisaging in these strategies the key to the successful spread of the Christian faith.¹² The plague of Cyprian is also reported to have swept “from East to West.”¹³ Among its earlier written attestations is the near-contemporary Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, compiled in Syria and containing references to the career of Emperor Philip the Arab (r. 244–249), whose abrupt demise after the celebrations of the Millennium of Rome in 248 CE may have been hastened by catastrophic events such as the outbreak of a pandemic.¹⁴ Philip’s long sojourn in the East is attested by an inscription. He was likely at Dura when on campaign against Shapur I in the East, as demonstrated by abundant coin finds.¹⁵

To add to war, plague and climate change, natural catastrophes had also struck. An inscription records an earthquake at Dura in 160 CE, when the town was still under Parthian rule. A votive stele, dedicated to “the greatest Zeus” (μέγιστῳ Δίῳ), was erected at the time of the earthquake in the temple of the Palmyrene Gods.¹⁶ While this catastrophe has not been substantiated by specific archaeological records of destruction, whatever the extent of the damage, reconstruction of buildings might have been an issue for some time, aggravated by the lack of manpower caused by the Antonine Plague. At the end of the 2nd century, Dura seemed ready to yield to another conqueror: Rome. The arrival of Roman soldiers provided an opportunity for rebuilding the town, which was embellished with fresco decorations under Philip the Arab.

2. The Frescoes of the Dura Europos Synagogue

The arrival of Roman legionaries, who made their headquarters in the northern sector of the city, provided new strength for the city’s activities. Inscriptions record the work of soldiers as builders. For example, the IV Scythian and III Cyrenaic legions, who arrived in town c. 212–213 CE, built a new amphitheatre

11 Harper 2015, 226.

12 Stark 2011, 114–9.

13 Harper 2015, 234.

14 Potter 1990, 144–6, 204–25, 254–8.

15 Trout 1989.

16 Baur/Rostovtzeff 1931, 86–90.

over the site of a complex of decaying baths.¹⁷ Part of the site of the old baths was left as a dumping ground for the ashes from a nearby newly-built bath facility.¹⁸

Besides new structures, a programme of frescoes was executed around the city in various phases and places. The last embellishment, which included the interior walls of the Jewish house of assembly, was carried out in the 240s.¹⁹ To this phase belong the extant paintings of the synagogue, an outstanding and in many ways unique document of Jewish iconism. Discovered in the 1930s and excavated by an archaeological team from Yale and Paris, the images on these frescoed panels have received a lot of attention. They have themselves become icons for the new academic discipline of Jewish Art.²⁰

As in the case of discussions about early Christianity, religious-ideological viewpoints have sometimes taken precedence over historical contextualisation, with the consequence that the Durene evidence has gained in reputation for its exceptionality rather than becoming more intelligible as a phenomenon of the 3rd century, appropriately inserted into its socio-historical milieu. Only recently has Eric Moormann advocated more clearly that the paintings should be considered as an expression of a Roman koine of wall-painting practices.²¹ This perspective allows for better contextualisation not only of the style, but also of the subject matter of the frescoes within Roman art. Previous observations about the uniformity of the painted programmes across different buildings at Dura, not least the similarities between the Jewish and Christian spaces,²² are also valuable to avoid a narrow interpretation of the synagogue paintings as an expression of Jewish exclusivity.²³ On the contrary, the images on these walls are speaking the international religious language of their time, dramatising the message of salvation that was at once promulgated by the Roman authorities and echoed in the sacred spaces that amplified its reception to a wider section of the population.

17 Rostovtzeff/Hopkins/Welles 1936, 68–83; for the inscription see pp. 76–77; Pollard 2000, 49, 52.

18 Rostovtzeff/Hopkins/Welles 1936, 75.

19 Kraeling 1956, 39–40.

20 Levine 2016; Fine 2010, 47–56. For theoretical considerations on this new discipline, see also Revel-Neher 2001.

21 Moormann 2021.

22 McClendon 2011.

23 For this view according to a competitive model, cf. Dirven 2004, 3 and n. 10; Rajak 2011; Elsner 2001.

3. The Reader in the Dura Europos Frescoes

Around the central niche of the West Wall, oriented towards Jerusalem, are four tall rectangular panels featuring each a full-length portrait of a man in Roman dress (Fig. 1). To the lower right (from the perspective of the viewer), the standing man of youthful appearance, lightly bearded, is holding an unfurled roll.²⁴ Many possible identifications have been proposed for this figure and those surrounding it among Hebrew biblical prophets, especially Moses.²⁵ However, these standing men do not necessarily represent well-known biblical figures.

In the process of “identifying” this figure, comparisons with images from early Christian art have been neglected. In particular, a strikingly similar depiction of a standing reader with a horizontally open roll features as the central panel on the 5th-century Brescia ivory casket, where it has been variously identified with the help of passages referring to the teaching ministry of Christ (Fig. 2).²⁶ Among these biblical references, the most likely proposal has been that of the passage in Luke 4, where Jesus undertakes the function of reader in the synagogue at Nazareth.²⁷ As a basic hypothesis, then, this image of the reader in the Dura fresco can be considered a performative, self-referential depiction of a *lector*’s function within the synagogue itself. The passage in Luke 4 is the closest ancient source about Jewish liturgical practices with the potential to give voice to the silent reader. It could provide content to the unfurled scroll that was once inscribed with words, but is now hopelessly unreadable.²⁸

24 The panel is designated with siglum WP III in Kraeling’s classification of the images: Cf. Kraeling 1956, 232–5.

25 Identification with Hebrew prophets has not yielded scholarly consensus. A common interpretation is to see all four panels as images of Moses, as reaffirmed in Levine 2016, 105, fig. 53, 114–5; cf. also Xeravits 2017, 115. Jensen 1999, fig. 10.2, publishes the image as “Moses holding a biblical scroll;” however, she has expressed support for Ezra in private communication. Other hypotheses include Jeremiah, Isaiah and Samuel.

26 Tkacz 2002.

27 Tkacz 2002, 33–4 and n. 46, reporting that Delbrueck suggested that the opening words of Isaiah were originally painted on the roll.

28 Du Mesnil du Buisson claimed he could detect the line-beginning on the left (rather than the right) side of what he called the Ezra scroll. He published the drawing of a few letters to support his idea that the painter wrote a cursive Greek style – like that of papyri: cf. Du Mesnil du Buisson 1939, 93, fig. 66.

4. Performing Isaiah in Luke 4

The passage in Luke 4 provides some tenuous evidence for the liturgical reading of the prophets, the *haftarah*, in a Jewish liturgical context.²⁹ However, the composite form of Luke's quotation, combining different verses adhering to the LXX version and omitting others, makes Jesus's act of "reading" a puzzling one.³⁰ In its New Testament form, the text is given as follows:

18 The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.
(Luke 4:18–19)

The composite nature of the quotation has been universally noted and carefully scrutinised.³¹ It has been recently argued that the quotation from Isaiah in Luke is adapted to suit the specific requirements of oral delivery on that day by that reader. To this end, according to Joseph Lear, Luke produces an aesthetically pleasing text for reading aloud.³² From the standpoint of the audience's aural reception, Sharon Ringe argues for the rewriting to have been "[a] product of the early church, which appears to have presented the text in the form in which the people were accustomed to hear the Scriptures."³³ Thus, the composite uttering of Jesus's Isaiah "reading" reveals a process of creative composition, specifically the use of midrashic techniques in assembling together texts with similar keywords and weaving out of these a memorable utterance of high impact and quality (*gezerah shawah*). This technique is akin to oral methods of composition, in which assonances were more important than logical sequences. While no extant Hebrew manuscript of Isaiah's chapters 58 and 61 reports these confections, the themes of salvation on the West

29 Schiffman 1999, 47, citing evidence from Luke 4:16–21 and Acts 13:13–15.

30 Anderson 1964, 268; Lear 2019, n. 1; Bovon 2002, 153.

31 Kimball 1994, 99–100; Lear 2019.

32 Lear 2019.

33 Ringe 1985, 38.

Wall of the Dura synagogue can help to visualise the exegetical background reflected by Luke's adaptation.³⁴

The open scroll in the image attests to the performative nature of the reader's action. Significantly, the scroll is depicted without the prescribed wooden finials to hold it open, thus sidestepping formal requirements and exuding a more informal air. It can be suggested that the words on the scroll act as an *aide mémoire* rather than prescribe a fixed text for reading aloud. If so, the act of reading is not understood as a concentrated effort at exact reproduction, but rather as a more personal, creative task, demanding a very different type of rhetorical skill.³⁵

This element of performance is also highlighted in the Brescia casket's more elaborate visual framework. On the ivory plaque, the scene is presented as though it was taking place on a stage; the open curtains are the most obvious sign of a performative setting. The depiction of curtains in pavement mosaics from Israel figuring Torah shrines attest to their presence and liturgical function.³⁶ Besides a figurative interpretation that stresses that these curtains are open as a sign of the revelation that Jesus brings to the prophetic reading, performance practices for reading and understanding Scripture are also alluded to.³⁷

This element of performativity is an integral component of the process of communication of religious belief through dramatically enacted narrative, which constitutes another element of the building blocks of Luke's Gospel account and is also a central component of the visual strategies at the Dura synagogue. The narrative arc of Luke's pericope culminates in the description of the effect of Jesus's performance of this particular proclamation on his audience. As Tkacz writes about the scene depicted on the Brescia casket:

And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him (Luke 4:20). [...] Christ holds the scroll, not of his own need: he gazes above it, not reading it. Rather,

34 "[S]everal authorities have given convincing evidences that Luke is using his unique L source or other traditional material rather than freely creating the narrative" (Kimball 1994, 98). On the attestations of Isa 61, cf. Bovon 2002, 153.

35 Nässelqvist 2016, 26–9, stresses the rarity of sight-reading (*ad oculos*) because of the difficulties of *scriptio continua*. Readers necessitated training before being able to do the job correctly. Cf. also Cavallo 1999.

36 For a typology, cf. Hachlili 2000, 155–7, fig. 12. For a discussion of the revealing/concealing function of curtain veils, cf. Jensen 2023.

37 Tkacz 2002, 34 n. 47, reports scholarship that has acknowledged this "stage-like" aspect and observed the affinity between this panel and manuscript images indebted to ancient theatre.

he displays it to others, opening it in a double sense. He explained it so that its meaning was opened, and he is shown holding its written surface toward the viewers, including those who see the casket.³⁸

The moment captured in Tkacz's description precisely recalls the observations made by Weitzmann and Kessler about the synagogue's reader, when they observe that his gaze is fixed not on the roll but beyond it.³⁹ Neither reader is, then, actively reading, but rather both are performing an ostentation of display: they show the scroll from which their 'reading' just took place, forging a link between the spoken and the written words. They display, in effect, not Scriptures, but an inspired prophetic scroll whose message is essentially in its oral proclamation rather than in its written form, format or language.

5. Seeing Salvation in Luke

Luke's visual theology has been the subject of a recent book-length study by Artyushin Sergey. In a fine analysis of the Luke 4 pericope, Sergey divides the passage into three 'scenes'. In the first scene of the proclamation of the message (or of the messenger), he demonstrates how a chiasmic structure of the verses highlights the middle verse, which falls on "the recovery of sight for the blind."⁴⁰ The exegetical implications of this structure point at the revelation of the Saviour.

Sergey's analysis finds support in the image of the reading messenger in the Dura synagogue. Next to the reader's feet, and covered with a red cloth, is a jar that can be identified as a *capsa*, i.e. a container for the scroll that the reader has just drawn out. Its shape resembles a Qumran jar set on a pedestal to keep it upright (Fig. 3). A red cloth drapes the scroll container and confers a special solemnity to it. If the reader in question uttered (and in Luke's version also embodied) the revelation of what was hidden in the prophetic scriptures, one may further pursue in a symbolic way the significance of this unveiling.⁴¹ Presumably, its unveiling was part of the liturgy's choreography. If the *capsa*

38 Tkacz 2002, 33–4 and n. 46, reports that Delbrueck suggested that the opening words of Isaiah were originally painted on the scroll.

39 Cf. Weitzmann and Kessler 1990, 130–2.

40 Sergey 2014, 118–23.

41 I am grateful to Dr Irina Brandén who offered this insight about the veiled *capsa* during my seminar at the Newman Institute Research Seminar in Late Ancient and Byzantine Cultures (NILAB).

was enshrined in the Torah niche, it may have been hidden behind curtains.⁴² The revelatory function of the curtains on the Brescia casket fulfils a similar purpose.⁴³

6. Liberation and the Jubilee

Although scholarship is divided on the interpretation of the “acceptable year” (ἐνιαυτός δεκτός) of Isaiah 58 and its use in Luke’s quotation,⁴⁴ its temporal anchoring through a dated image in a specific milieu, the Roman border town of Dura Europos, enables a more detailed reading of that proclamation in this 3rd-century context. As we have seen, several factors in the 2nd and 3rd centuries point to a situation of crisis within which imperial authority began to deliver effective messages of hope that resemble in essence the promises made in Isaiah’s prophecy.

International principles of justice and equality acquired new visibility as desirable aims through the policies of the Antonine and Severan dynasties. A specific echo of the promises of freedom for captives and oppressed is found in the promulgation of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 213 CE, through which free-born or freed provincial inhabitants acquired the status of Roman citizens. Roman citizenship had formerly been the exclusive privilege of those living on the Italian peninsula. While the motivations for this promulgation by Emperor Caracalla were likely a mixture of practical necessity and ideals, the impact of his policy on the mood and self-perception of the Eastern provinces must have been significant. The military quarters in Dura, the *principia*, were dedicated to Caracalla and his mother, Julia Domna; monuments to him and his brother Geta may also have been present.⁴⁵ Legal repercussions of the changed status of citizens were tangible. For example, at Dura Europos, independent business exchanges and contracts by women are well documented in papyri found there.⁴⁶

Key to understanding these connections is the representative role that the figure of Alexander the Great – whatever his reality – continued to embody

42 Meyers 1999, 203: “Holes for a *parokhet*; or curtain were identified on top of the lintel;” Kraeling 1956, 255–9, and nn. 8, 11, 14 on baldachin or *parokhet*.

43 Tkacz 2002, 97–98 elaborated on *velatio-revelatio*.

44 Luthy 2019, for example, argues against any Jubilee connections. In his view, the kingdom (βασιλεία) of God should be distinguished from notions about a Jubilee year. Cf. esp. Luthy 2019, 135–7 on Isa 58.

45 Acqua 2016, 147 and 157.

46 Harper 2018, 125; Cotton 1993; Sommer 2016, 63–5.

for this group of 'Europeans', namely, the highly educated and sophisticated Hellenised Babylonian Jews, bilingual in Greek and Aramaic/Syriac as well as conversant with Parthian and Middle Persian, as the multi-lingual graffiti at Dura attest. Caracalla's *Constitutio* deliberately pursued a policy of revival of Alexander's panhellenic ideals, which famously sought in a tolerant, if often syncretistic, approach the best solution for bringing together in harmony disparate civilisations under one rule in a huge, geographically diverse empire.⁴⁷

Although Imrie is sceptical that Caracalla could imitate de facto the historical Alexander, he nonetheless admits that it was in emulation of Alexander's image (*imitatio Alexandri*) that the emperor wished to "promote social inclusion at all levels of society."⁴⁸ His main ambition was "to transcend national differences," an aim whose reverse side of the coin could be the annulment of local customs and traditions.⁴⁹ The vision of harmony that Septimius Severus experienced in his famous dream, where he had a vision of his reign from the top of a mountain, uses a musical metaphor to express such unity in diversity as the blending together of different sounds to produce a pleasing chorus from the combination of voices.⁵⁰ Moreover, openness to the foreign was considered a virtue, but jealousy for one's own privileges was a counter-force that risked blocking developments towards real inclusiveness. These are the very questions discussed in the Nazareth episode in Luke 4, recurrent themes in history that nascent Christianity attempted to address radically through the words of Isaiah.

At the other end of this historical continuum that began ideally with Alexander the Great was the imminent celebration of the Millennium of Rome, a special jubilee. The task of honouring it fell to Emperor Philip the Arab (s. 244–249 CE) who organised and celebrated the festivities in 248 CE. Clifford Ando considers the extravagant expenses for the Millennium games as one of the factors contributing to the demise of the emperor shortly after that date.⁵¹ Ando notes that "no record survives of the form taken by the celebration" apart from some coins issued to mark the event.⁵² There seems to be an implicit

47 Imrie 2018, 99–112; Baharal 1996, 70.

48 Imrie 2018, 100.

49 Imrie 2018, 103, quoting Brunt (1965) 215.

50 Harper 2018, 125; Birley 1988, 75–6.

51 Cf. Ando 2012, 119; Harper 2018, 120–1.

52 Ando 2012, 119 n. 24. The coins are listed by Ando as follows: RIC Philip nos 12–24, SAECULARES AUGG, and 25, SAECULUM NOVUM (from Rome), no. 85 (from Antioch) and nos. 106–8 and 111 from an unspecified eastern mint. Ando does not give reference to the "later literary sources" that record the event without details. York 1972, 320–32, 328 n. 36, references primary sources on the pagan nature of the celebrations.

damnatio memoriae of Philip that combines silence with a relentless denigration of his person and career.⁵³ York's study that argued for Philip's Christian identity has not received wide support; but definitions largely depend on what one means by words and categories such as "Christian."⁵⁴ Most scholars apply a strict *aut-aut* criterion between belief in Christ and pagan or Jewish practices. York, however, claims that "the participation of Philip in the official cult of Rome was neither syncretism nor pure opportunism but a universalism which was justified by the allegorism of his teacher, Origen, who hoped to see all creation united with God through the Logos."⁵⁵ While York's connection between Origen's allegorical style and Philip's policy is debatable, there is no doubt that being a Christian in pagan dress was a perfectly viable and ordinary occurrence in late antiquity, as attested by many examples in Alexandria.⁵⁶

In Philip's case, harnessing this hybridity by concentrating on substance rather than form provided adequate means of implementing the highest (Christian) ideals of reconciliation and forgiveness. It was this strict application of principles of universality which, in my view, accelerated his demise. In particular, his policy of both military and cultural reconciliation with Persia was strongly opposed in the Roman Empire. Speculation has also occurred concerning apocalyptic anxieties surrounding Rome's millennium, which engendered a religious turn, intensifying demonstrations of piety and thanksgiving to the gods. These activities that used to be the privilege of the few were now extended to the many and required of all Roman citizens.⁵⁷

7. Significance of Style

From the point of view of style, the costumes of the performers represented on the Dura synagogue walls display the syncretism between Roman-Hellenistic and Persian cultures. Quite apart from the stylistic question of Parthian art, which has attracted much debate,⁵⁸ the visual presentation of the fashion styles is undoubtedly mixed. Observing the contrast between the Parthian courtly

53 York 1972, 322–3, explains the various perspectives from which such hostility arose.

54 Comparatively little scholarship has been produced about this Roman emperor with the intriguing epithet of "the Arab." York defines Philip as "the son of an Arab sheik and obviously a Christian" (York 1972, 320).

55 York 1972, 330.

56 See Litwa 2023.

57 Cf. Ando 2012, 134 and n. 15; Potter 1990, 39 and 258.

58 Cf. Dirven 2016, with earlier bibliography. Dirven rejects Rostovtzeff's definition of a homogenous "Parthian" style.

attire of Mordechai and the Greek *chitons* and *himations* worn by the men who surround him in the so-called Purim or Esther panel of the synagogue, Dalia Tawil speaks of a “duality of clothing (i.e. Greek and Iranian)” as “a rather common pictorial convention on monuments from Dura and Palmyra.”⁵⁹

A decorative cornice with Dionysiac motifs that has been found in various locations at Dura has also been described as combining Hellenistic features with local motifs. Allag concludes that these iconographies are juxtaposed rather than merged together, considering them “un signe de coexistence plutôt que de réelle fusion.”⁶⁰ According to Allag’s interpretation, it was considered acceptable that the two cultures be depicted side by side without any need for underlining differences. Lastly, in the copious graffiti found around Dura, images of Parthian warriors are common, and inscriptions include Iranian sentences written on the walls of the synagogue.⁶¹ This abundant evidence speaks to a reality of exchanges and integration in a spirit of equality rather than dominance. It throws into doubt the image of the Persian as the undiscussed rival and enemy, suggesting that Philip the Arab’s plans may have looked more towards peaceful coexistence and compromise than conquest by force.

Conclusion: Proclaiming Salvation

Salvation is an ancient concept that entered the core of the Christian message in its formative stages. In Greek, the word *σωτηρία* had the double significance of “deliverance” and “preservation,” while its translated meaning of “salvation” is attested for Septuagint and New Testament usage.⁶² Resting on a basis of concrete deliverances (from death, sickness, catastrophe), and of practical preservation (in the form of life, health, prosperity, peace), the concept of *σωτηρία* reflects the anthropological longing of humans for what is good, pleasant, happy. As such, it is associated with pre-Christian cults that catered to specific needs, such as Asclepius the doctor-divinity, or oriental cults that provided eschatological myths of rebirth and afterlife, such as Isis and Dionysus.⁶³ Nor was the Jewish-Christian development of the concept of salvation immediately or ever completely abstracted from a concrete referent, as miraculous healings, for example sight to the blind, were continuously in focus.

59 Tawil 1979, 104.

60 Allag 2012, 136.

61 Goldman 1990. That these graffiti were left by occasional visitors is countered by Westeinde 2020, 190. Cf. also Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 178.

62 Moreschini 2020.

63 Cf. Ezquerro 2008; Sfameni Gasparro 2002a and 2002b.

By looking at the image of the synagogue reader, we have seen how Isaiah's message of salvation could be proclaimed in a specific historical context in which the local Syrian population struggled to work its way out of catastrophes such as earthquakes, epidemics and wars. It was connected with a Jubilee motif intended not only as legal respite, but as reason for a special anniversary celebration. Moreover, the inversion of established hierarchies and the subversion of entrenched privileged status were part of this hopeful message, envisaging a new open society. The utopian side of this proclamation was fit for mythologising, but what is remarkable of the particular historical moment is that steps in this direction were supported by Roman imperial leaders at that juncture. Inspired by Augustan grandeur and Alexander the Great's multicultural vision as template, Antonines, Severans and, in the last instance, Philip the Arab – a native of Bosra in the same region as Dura – attempted to amplify and diffuse an unusual, and largely unworldly, social and political pattern. The magnitude of the ideal justifies the inevitability of its practical failure, but its articulation, however imperfect, set in motion the perpetuation of the messenger's hopeful proclamation. Ultimately, it encouraged mechanisms of solidarity beyond self-interested pursuits.

The exegetical context in which the image of the Dura reader is inserted thus argues for its identification with an anointed Messiah, a Christ-like figure. Placing the image in conversation with Luke's pericope has reciprocally illuminated a context that goes beyond textual borrowings. Thus, as I have argued, Luke's narrative composition weaves together the exegetical elements found on the Dura synagogue's West Wall, constructing the Lukan Christ according to parameters that would have resonated with a community nurtured on an oral exposition of the Scriptures.⁶⁴ Indeed, some viewers may have gone on to recognise the reader image as Jesus. In that case, the full-length panel portrait would provide his earliest "depiction," cohering with a tradition that considered Luke the evangelist as a painter.⁶⁵

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64 Stern 2012 gives a good overview of such practices.

65 Bacci 2014, 1–10; Raynor 2015. For a theological understanding, cf. Sergey 2014.

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Illustrations



FIG. 12.1
The 'Torah Reader', Panel WP III
in the Dura Europos Synagogue
(Wikimedia Commons).



FIG. 12.2 Courtesy of Archivio Fotografico Musei Civici di Brescia – Fotostudio Rapuzzi.



FIG. 12.3
Pottery jar for storing reading scrolls
from Qumran, 2nd cent. BCE,
Metropolitan Art Museum, New York
(Public Domain); see
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/325659>.

Salvific Nature of Miracles during Crisis.

Socio-Rhetorical Examination of Luke 7:11–17

Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh

Introduction

Miracles of healing, exorcism, resuscitation/raising of the dead back to life and divine provision of existential needs form a substantial component of the Gospel of Luke. Miracles are part of the salvation proclamation (deeds) of Jesus to provide immediate remedies for crises. They compose the deeds of Jesus that provided balance for his proclamation (words/sayings). The miracles were an important component of Jesus' work due to the sicknesses for which ancient Mediterranean medical science could not effectively provide immediate cures.¹ For example, the woman with the haemorrhage could not be cured by any of the many physician services she sought (Luke 8:43–48). The Royal official, despite having access to good physicians due to his position, sought Jesus to heal his servant (John 4:46–54). Therefore, in the ancient Mediterranean society, would-be disciples preferred to be protégés of miracle performing prophets over sages so that they and their families could be insured against situations/conditions that medical sciences could not easily deal with, and subsequently receive the power to also perform miracles.²

In comparison to the miracles of healing and exorcism in the Gospels, miracles of resuscitation are very few. The restoration of a girl to life (Mark 5:21–43; Matt 9:19–26), the raising of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–45) are the miracles of resuscitation/raising of the dead back to life. The narrative for this study is this miracle type unique to the Gospel of Luke. It is a miracle narrative due to its primary structure: a problem to be remedied (dead son); presence of a religious/charismatic person (Jesus); testimony (the dead son was raised to life).³ However, it is also a pointer to Jesus' encounter with women in the Gospel of Luke. This study uses socio-rhetorical analysis to re-interpret Luke 7:11–17. It examines how the

1 Cf. Kahl 2018, 47–76; Keener 2011, 21–7; Eve 2009, 51–64.

2 Cf. Aryeh 2020, 43–68.

3 Cf. Kahl 1994, 153–65.

narrative frames death as a crisis demanding divine intervention, revealing the “world within the text.” This understanding is then applied to analyse the specific context of Ghana, exploring how this biblical perspective interacts with its realities (the “world in front of the text”).

1. Scholarly Interpretations of Luke 7:11–17

Interpretations of Luke 7:11–17 are often concentrated on the intertextual relationship to the Elijah-Elisha prophetic catenae of raising widows’ sons back to life. The Elijah-Elisha prophetic catenae are appealed to in order to authentically influence and to be in dialogue with the narrative of the raising of the widow’s son at Nain.⁴ This is prejudiced by the response of the audience concerning the identity of Jesus (“great prophet who has arisen among us,” *προφήτης μέγας ἡγέρθη ἐν ἡμῖν*, Luke 7:16c), which compelled many interpreters of the narrative to look back into the Hebrew Bible, particularly to the narratives of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 17:17–24 and 2 Kings 4:8–37, respectively. The response of the audience seems to suggest that prophets alone possess the power to raise the dead, or that prophets are the only religious persons they know to have raised the dead back to life.

The relationship between the narrative of the raising of the widow’s son at Nain and the raising of the widow’s son by Elijah is a prophetic rhetorolect of early Christian miracle narration. In other words, the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic traditions provided the foundation for how miracles were narrated in the Gospels and early Christianity. A key link between the narratives of Elijah and Elisha resurrecting a widow’s son, and Jesus raising the widow’s son at Nain, is the identity of the miracle worker (Jesus) as part of this prophetic lineage. After the miracle happened, the widow in the Elijah narrative confirmed, “Now I know that you are a man of God” (1 Kings 17:24b) and that “the word of God in your mouth [the mouth of Elijah] is true” (1 Kings 17:24c). In the narrative of the raising of the widow’s son by Elisha, the identity of Elisha as *אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים* (man of God) occurs four times (2 Kings 4:9, 25, 27a, 27c) to emphasise Elisha’s identity as a prophet who has proximity with God. The witnesses to Jesus’ raising the widow’s son at Nain confirmed that Jesus is *προφήτης μέγας* (“a great prophet”) (Luke 7:16b) and that *ὅτι ἐπεσκέψατο ὁ θεὸς τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ* (“God has looked on his people with favour,” Luke 7:16c). This identity reveals

4 Cf. Meier 1994, 788–98.

the capability of the protagonists in the narratives to deploy the power of God to raise the dead.⁵

2. Method of This Study

This study employs the socio-rhetorical interpretation propounded by Vernon K. Robbins. Socio-rhetorical criticism is an integrated approach to biblical interpretation due to the variety of methods and approaches. It “... is an interpretive analytic – an approach that evaluates and reorients its strategies as it engages in multi-faceted dialogue with the texts and other phenomena that come within its purview. ... Using insights from sociolinguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, ethnography, literary studies, social sciences, and ideological studies.”⁶ Socio-rhetorical criticism is composed of five textures: (1) inner texture; (2) intertexture; (3) socio-cultural texture; (4) ideological texture; and (5) sacred texture.

The inner texture is adopted for the study since it examines words as found in a narrative unit or within the horizon of a study. Its purpose “is to gain an intimate knowledge of words, word patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text, which are the context for meaning and meaning-effects that an interpreter analyses.”⁷ It can be referred to as the close reading of the text. Inner texture in this study will delineate the communicative significance of the narrative and its processes for the implied narrator and the implied reader(s). It also investigates words, phrases, and *topoi* that lead to the possible discovery of the social identity, “cultural, and ideological networks of meanings and meaning effects in the rhetoric of [the] text.”⁸ The literary and rhetorical exegesis of a text is guided by repetition, progression, narrational, opening-middle-closing (plot), argumentative, and sensory-aesthetic. The elements of rhetology and rhetography in the inner texture help generate a graphic image containing a certain possibility of persuasion. Thus, the inner texture analysis within socio-rhetorical interpretation will be applied to examine the historical context of Luke 7:11–17 to analyse how the result of the rhetorical interpretation can shed light on salvation during crises in the religio-cultural context of Ghana. Due to limited space, the opening-middle-closing (plot), argumentative, and sensory-aesthetic textures will not be featured in this study.

⁵ Cf. Robbins 2012, 17–84.

⁶ Robbins 2004, 2.

⁷ Vondey 2012, 134–59.

⁸ Robbins, and von Thaden Jr., and Bruehler 2016, xxii.

3. Inner Texture Interpretation of Luke 7:11–17

3.1 Repetitive and Progression Texture: Analysing the Communicative Strategies of the Implied Narrator

The account of Jesus raising the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17) is unique to Luke's Gospel, appearing nowhere else in the canonical Gospels. Within socio-rhetorical interpretation, repetitive texture refers to the patterned recurrence of key terms and concepts. These repetitions form the narrative's essential building blocks, revealing its core themes and the authorial emphasis of the implied narrator and what is intended for the implied reader. These duplicated terms and concepts form the basis for the rhetorical interpretation and the understanding of the implied narrator's intention.

- The Greek noun πόλις (polis, translating to “city” or “town”) is encountered three times within the scriptural passage of Luke 7:11–12, with each occurrence employing a distinct grammatical case that influences its interpretative meaning within the broader narrative context. The initial instance, found in verse 11a (accusative – πόλιν), serves merely to identify Nain as the intended destination or location (“to a city called Nain”), thereby establishing the narrative's geographical setting. The subsequent instance, located in verse 12a (genitive – πόλεως), conveys a sense of possession or association. This instance delineates “the gate of the city” (τῇ πύλῃ τῆς πόλεως), thereby accentuating a critical physical characteristic (the gate) that designates Nain as a structured, walled community. The third instance, appearing in verse 12e (genitive – πόλεως), represents a conventional variant, depicting the crowd as being affiliated with or characteristic of the city. This serves to highlight Nain's essence as a densely populated community. The evolution of the term πόλις transitions from merely denoting the geographical location (Nain as a city – accusative) to encapsulating its communal attributes: its physical infrastructure (the city gate – genitive) and its demographic composition (the city's substantial population – inferred from the crowd associated with it through the genitive). This grammatical transition subtly constructs the portrayal of Nain not solely as a geographical site, but as a structured, inhabited community, thereby laying the groundwork for the communal aspect of the forthcoming miracle.⁹
- The noun μήτηρ (mother) is utilised twice within the narrative of the widow of Nain as recounted in the Gospel of Luke (7:12–15), with both instances occurring in the dative case. This consistent grammatical selection serves

9 Green, 1997, 290–1.

- distinct yet interrelated narrative and theological functions. In verse 12b (dative – τῇ μητρὶ), the dative case primarily conveys notions of relationship or possession. It delineates two essential aspects concerning the woman/widow. She is identified as the mother of the deceased young man, thereby grammatically situating her as the individual to whom the son is intrinsically linked through familial ties. Her designation as a χήρα (widow) is directly correlated to this association. The loss of her only son (μονογενὴς υἱός) while already in the state of widowhood signifies a profound social and economic disaster. This initial mention of μήτηρ delineates her identity within the scene: a mourning mother confronting absolute impoverishment. The subsequent occurrence of the dative is found in verse 15b (τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ). In this instance, the dative chiefly signifies the indirect object – the recipient of the action. The verb ἔδωκεν (he gave) governs this grammatical case. The implications are significant. The culmination of the miracle transcends the mere revival of the son; it encompasses his active return to the specific individual defined by their relational bond articulated in verse 12, namely, the mother.¹⁰ The identical grammatical structure (μήτηρ in the dative) forges a compelling connection. The action explicitly rectifies the calamity described in verse 12. The son, previously lost to death and thus estranged from his mother, is now reinstated to her. The phrase τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ (to his mother) unequivocally corroborates that the woman reclaiming her son is the same biological mother recognised earlier. The miracle reinstates the precise relationship that had been fragmented by death.
- The consistent application of the dative case for μήτηρ highlights the unaltered core identity of the woman throughout the narrative. She is fundamentally characterised by her role as a mother. The progression from the dative indicating relationship/possession within the context of death (v.12b), to the dative denoting reciprocity within the context of life restored (v.15b), engenders a compelling narrative trajectory. The miracle directly addresses the specific loss emphasised in the initial instance. Luke employs this grammatical framework to ensure that the reader comprehends that the ultimate intention and affirmation of the miracle reside in the restoration of a son to his mother, thus reversing her social demise and fulfilling the inherent necessity signalled by her identification as both μήτηρ and χήρα in verse 12. The recurring dative maintains the focus on the restoration of this essential human relationship. It preserves the core linguistic observation while enriching the comprehension of how the grammar operates within each verse and elucidating why Luke's deliberate choices (utilising μήτηρ

¹⁰ Nolland, 1989, 323.

in the dative on two occasions) hold significance for interpreting the narrative's meaning and impact.

- The verb ἐγείρω (to raise up, to awaken, or to cause to rise) is prominently featured on two occasions in immediate succession within the narrative of the Nain miracle (Luke 7:14–15). Of particular significance is its manifestation in two separate grammatical forms (mood and voice), which signifies a substantial transformation in perspective and agency. In verse 14 (ἐγέρθητι – imperative aorist passive), the mood is imperative, denoting a command. Jesus unequivocally instructs the deceased young man to rise. Although the structure is grammatically passive (be raised!), the contextual interpretation necessitates an understanding of it as a 'divine passive' or 'middle sense'. The emphasis is placed on the resultant condition of the young man (being raised) rather than the agent executing the action. Nevertheless, the agent remains Jesus, who is issuing the command. This grammatical form accentuates Jesus' sovereign authority over mortality. He neither prays nor requests; rather, he commands with directness. The aorist tense perceives the action as a singular, definitive occurrence. It delineates the instantaneous moment of resurrection as commanded by Jesus. This represents the direct impetus for the miracle. The spoken utterance of Jesus effectuates the resurrection.¹¹
- Verse 15b (ἡγέρθη – indicative aorist passive) conveys a mood that asserts a fact or recounts an event acknowledged as real by the witnesses. The passive voice, in this context, obfuscates the direct agent (Jesus) from the crowd's immediate theological interpretation. They perceive the event (a resurrection has transpired) yet attribute its ultimate causation differently. The aorist tense recounts the resurrection as a completed past action from the perspective of the crowd articulating the statement. Notably, the subject of ἡγέρθη in this instance is not the young man, but rather "a great prophet" (προφήτης μέγας). The crowd is attributing the verb ἐγείρω to Jesus, rather than to the resurrected son. This interpretation and confession by the crowd are catalysed by the observation of the undeniable miracle. They acknowledge that an individual endowed with extraordinary power ("a great prophet") has been exalted by God (ἡγέρθη – divine passive) and is presently active ("has arisen") among them. While they accurately discern the divine origin of the event and Jesus' prophetic role (implicitly connecting him to figures such as Elijah who raised the dead), they have yet to comprehend Jesus' complete identity as the originator of the command (ἐγέρθητι) itself.

11 Tannehill, 1996, 121.

They utilise the same verb root but apply it to Jesus' emergence as a prophet, rather than to his act of resurrecting the dead.

- The imperative ἐγέρθητι (v.14) represents the miraculous act itself, wherein Jesus' authoritative command engenders the resurrection. The indicative ἡγέρθη (v.15) reflects the human response – the crowd's astonished confession regarding Jesus, founded upon the observation of the outcome of his command. The initial usage illustrates Jesus' power. Its subsequent usage elucidates the crowd's theological comprehension (albeit partial) of who Jesus must be as a result of that power.¹² ἐγέρθητι is directed towards the deceased son (You arise!). ἡγέρθη is articulated concerning Jesus ("a great prophet has arisen"). The crowd uses the verb metaphorically for Jesus' emergence, while Jesus uses it literally for the son's resurrection. Both passive forms ultimately point to God as the source of authority and power. Jesus acts with God's authority in verse 14 (divine passive command), and the crowd acknowledges God as the one who raises up prophets in v.15 (divine passive statement).
- The noun ὄχλος (crowd, multitude, or throng) appears twice within the opening verses of the narrative (Luke 7:11–12), both times in the nominative case. This consistent grammatical choice is deliberate and serves key functions in structuring the scene and highlighting its central participants. The term ὄχλος identifies the "large crowd" as one of the primary actors in this part of the narrative. This crowd represents Jesus' followers and companions. They are travelling with him (συνεπορεύετο αὐτῷ) into Nain. This establishes Jesus' significant public presence and influence; he is not arriving alone but is accompanied by a substantial group of people drawn to him. Again, ὄχλος is the nominative subject of its clause. The adjective ἱκανός (considerable, large, sizeable, or sufficient), emphasises its significant size. This crowd represents the community of Nain in mourning. They are accompanying (σὺν αὐτῇ) the widow as she leaves the city to bury her son. This "considerable crowd" underscores the social significance of the event – the death of a widow's only son was a community tragedy, and emphasises the public nature of the impending encounter.
- Using the nominative case twice definitively marks both crowds as primary subjects driving the action within their respective clauses. Luke intentionally foregrounds these two groups. The repetition of ὄχλος in the nominative creates a parallel structure: ὄχλος πολὺς (with Jesus, v.11) entering Nain, and ὄχλος ἱκανὸς τῆς πόλεως (with the widow, v.12) leaving Nain. This parallel setup highlights the imminent collision of two worlds at the city gate (v.12a).

¹² Tannehill, 1996, 121.

The ‘crowd of life’ accompanying the healer Jesus meets the ‘crowd of death’ accompanying the funeral procession. This convergence is the dramatic setting for the miracle. The two nominative uses of ὄχλοι represent contrasting movements and realities. Both crowds ensure that the miracle occurs in a highly public context. The witnesses to the tragedy (the city’s crowd) and the witnesses to Jesus’ ministry (his travelling crowd) will jointly witness the resurrection (v.16), leading to the climactic confession and glorification of God. The size of both crowds (πολύς – large; ἱκανός – considerable) stresses that this event is not private but profoundly impacts the wider community. The miracle’s significance extends beyond the widow and her son to these assembled groups. The nominative case plays a crucial role with the two distinct crowds in setting the scene, driving the narrative tension, and framing the public significance of the miracle that follows.¹³

- The verbs λέγω (essentially “to articulate,” “to converse,” “to assert”) and its contextual variant λαλέω (to converse, to communicate) routinely denote audible expressions or dialogue, fulfilling critical and distinct functions within the Nain miracle narrative (Luke 7:13–16), delineating pivotal instances of communication that propel the narrative forward and elucidate its significance. The aorist tense εἶπεν conceptualises the act of verbal expression as a singular, consummated event within the past narrative framework. The indicative mood articulates a factual assertion concerning Jesus’ verbal declarations. This pertains to the preliminary words addressed to the bereaved widow. The aorist indicative accentuates it as a definitive, empathetic intervention. The phrase μὴ κλαίε – “Do not weep” – provides initial solace and indicates his recognition of her anguish, thus preparing the ground for his consequential action. It establishes Jesus’ authoritative presence and compassionate intent preceding the miracle. The subsequent occurrence of λέγω in verse 14c is situated in the indicative present – λέγω. The present tense portrays the act of speech as transpiring in the immediate context of the narrative. It engenders vividness and immediacy. The indicative mood conveys this as a factual declaration by Jesus. The present tense, in conjunction with the pronoun σοι (to you), amplifies the authority, immediacy, and personal nature of Jesus’ directive. This is not a general pronouncement; it constitutes a potent, targeted expression aimed at facilitating transformation. The verb λέγω, in this instance, is intrinsically associated with the performative command (ἐγέρθητι – “arise!”).

¹³ Witherington III 1998, 112–3.

The final instance of λέγω in verse 16a manifests as the present participle λέγοντες. The present active participle, nominative plural masculine (λέγοντες) operates both verbally (describing action) and adjectivally (modifying the subject – the crowd). The present tense illustrates the act of speaking as concurrent with and characterising the principal verb ἐδόξαζον (they were glorifying). It indicates that the act of glorification was articulated through speech. The crowd serves as the active agent of this expression. The participle introduces the crowd's theological affirmation 'προφήτης μέγας ἡγέρθη ἐν ἡμῖν. It signifies the verbal reaction to the miracle. Their "saying" (λέγοντες) functions as an interpretative and declarative act, delineating Jesus' identity in light of the witnessed event. This expression constitutes the narrative's climactic proclamation.

The selection of verbs (λαλέω vs. λέγω) frequently intersects; λαλέω often accentuates the physical act of verbalisation, producing sounds, or engaging in discourse. It underscores the restored physical capability and audible evidence of vitality in the young man. His "beginning to speak" (ἤρξατο λαλεῖν) offers concrete, audible verification that the miracle of resurrection is both complete and fully efficacious. He is not merely animated; he is communicative. This verb selection reinforces the reality and wholeness of his restoration.¹⁴ The employment of λαλέω and λέγω significantly advances the speech acts that propel the narrative from Jesus' compassion to the crowd's confession, with the son's restored speech serving as the crucial link and evidence.

Hence, the main terms/building blocks that Luke 7:11–17 is constructed on are: πόλις, ὄχλος, μήτηρ, ἐγείρω, and λέγω. These are polyptoton repetitions, the rhetorical repetition of words of the same root, inflected or conjugated in different forms of gender, case and number, to indicate the linguistic pattern of a narrative by the implied narrator.¹⁵ The polyptoton repetitive technique is used to focus the implied readers' attention on the root of the terms used, which form the rhetorical bridge on which the narrative of the raising of the widow's son at Nain was composed and is communicated to the implied reader(s). In other words, these repeated terms build a logical progression that steers the reader's interpretation of Luke 7:11–17. They act as essential hermeneutical signposts, simultaneously shaping the narrative structure by which salvation is administered to the young man.

¹⁴ Witherington III 1998, 112–3.

¹⁵ Cf. Aboagye Aryeh 2021, 493–516; Abdulla 2001, 289–303.

3.2 **Narrational Texture: Composing the Event of the Raising the Widow’s son at Nain**

Narrative texture approaches the text with the assumption that the implied reader(s) of the text possess(es) other information besides the written text.¹⁶ The narrative of the raising of the widow’s son at Nain is a μυθικὸν πρᾶγμα due to ὁ κύριος (the Lord), a reference to Jesus in v.13. Jesus is the hero of the narrative, the one who restores joy to the widow. The μυθικὸν πρᾶγμα is confirmed by προφήτης μέγας (“a great prophet”) in v.16. Narrative texture is composed of four components/schemes: (1) events; (2) characters; (3) settings; and (4) discourse, which may express any branch of rhetoric – epideictic, judicial and deliberative.¹⁷

3.2.1 **Event**

The event is often composed of order, duration and frequency.¹⁸ The passage of Luke 7:11–17 is a rhetorical unit modelled in a four to six-part rhetorical composition:¹⁹

TABLE 13.1

Rhetorical Unit	Corresponding reference in Luke 7:11–17
<i>Exordium</i> Introduction to the composition	v.11
<i>Narratio</i> Explains the nature of the narrative/ discourse	vv.12–14
<i>Propositio</i> Thesis of the narrative with supportive arguments	vv.15
<i>Peroratio</i> Recapitulation of the main thoughts in the narrative into conclusion	vv.16–17

16 Cf. Kelber 1988, 1–20.
17 Cf. Robbins 2016, 368–9.
18 Cf. Robbins 1996, 372.
19 Cf. Phillips 2008, 226–65; Witherington 1995, 44.

The *exordium* demonstrates a change of direction and focus from one location to another by the use of the Lukan transitional phrase – καὶ ἐγένετο (afterwards, now), which is not novel in Luke when introducing a new narrative (e.g. 5:12, 17; 8: 1; 9:18, 29; 11:1; 14:1; 17:11; 19:29; 20:1; 24:50). Καὶ ἐγένετο is an indicator to the implied reader(s) that there is a change in focus.²⁰ This opening verse (7:11) establishes Jesus as the narrative’s central figure solely through pronouns (he, him). Notably, it omits any mention of where Jesus and his followers originated. This serves as bait to draw the inquisitorial reasoning of the implied reader(s) to enquire or read further. It may also infer that the implied narrator assumes that the audience and the implied reader(s) know this information.

The *narratio* attempts to explain the nature of the narrative. It is largely dominated by the actions of the protagonist and the tritagonists. The narrative deliberately delays Jesus’ encounter with the widow and her son until her vulnerable status has been clarified (as a mother who lost her only child), framing the miracle within its social context. The dead son is not an adopted child. Hence, the widow is in crisis and is in urgent need of divine intervention. The *narratio* also demonstrates the mode used by Jesus to raise the dead young son from the dead – that is, the spoken word.

Within the rhetorical structure of Luke 7:11–17, the *propositio* (thesis) highlights Jesus’ spoken words as the active agent of resurrection, demonstrating his divine authority to restore life. Therefore, the young son rises from the dead. Supporting proof of this is that he (the former dead young son) speaks (λαλέω).

Finally, the *peroratio* shows that the joy of the young son being raised back to life was not limited to the widow. It affects the crowd such that they are in awe, glorify God and make an intertextual comment on the event.

In epideictic rhetoric,²¹ the narrative shows cohesion as follows:

TABLE 13.2

Epideictic Rhetoric	Corresponding reference in Luke 7:11–17
Case: The only son of a widow is dead and they are going to bury him.	vv.11–12
Result/Case: Jesus has compassion on the widow and says to her “do not weep.”	v.13

20 Cf. Aryeh 2021, 504.

21 Cf. Robbins 2012, 17–84.

TABLE 13.2 (cont.)

Epideictic Rhetoric	Corresponding reference in Luke 7:11–17
Result: Jesus commands the dead son to rise and he rises.	vv.14–15
Result: The audience glorifies God that a great prophet has arisen. News of Jesus raising the widow’s son circulated widely – reaching Judea and the neighbouring regions.	vv.16–17

Both the rhetorical unit and the epideictic rhetorical presentation reveal the characters in the passage.

3.2.2 Characters

The narrative portrays Jesus, the widow, the crowd, the casket bearers, and the dead young son as the characters. Jesus is the central actor driving the narrative, while all other characters serve supporting roles to advance his mission. There is no antagonist in the narrative. Jesus is the central character who possesses the divine power to interrupt a funeral procession and raise the dead back to life.

Unfortunately, the implied narrator does not mention Jesus by his proper name. He is referred to with pronouns and the Christological depiction – ὁ κύριος (“the Lord”). The implied narrator portrays Jesus as an itinerant religious person with a large following, a man with compassion (ἐσπλαγγνίσθη, v.13). This implies that Jesus was able to balance spirituality with human emotion. He is portrayed as a character with *pathos* reasoning, which is the hallmark of many religious leaders. Jesus’ compassion is dependent on his ability to see (ὁράω; v.13) the crisis and administer salvation. Moved by compassion, Jesus touches the σορός (bier/coffin) – an act risking ritual defilement. This deliberate choice to become ceremonially unclean for others’ sake reveals his sacrificial identity: a Bearer of Numinous Power (BNP) who commands life at will. The narrator’s use of ὁ κύριος (“the Lord”) confirms this high Christology, framing Jesus as the divine agent who transcends purity laws to enact salvation. This distinguishes him from the Petitioner/Mediator of Numinous Power (P/MNP). However, the audience describes him as a P/MNP, like some ancient prophet. The implied narrator, therefore, leaves the implied reader(s) in a confused state concerning

Jesus' actual identity. His characterisation of the protagonist – Jesus – as the BNP, along with the P/MNP, alludes to the confusion regarding the specific character of Jesus in a single narrative.²² The BNP element of Jesus makes him a key protagonist in some narratives in many anthologies and autobiographies of religious documents, both ancient and modern.²³ In the narrative, Jesus is a flat character with a rounded identity who moves from one location to the other to bring salvation in moments of crisis.²⁴

The tritagonists support the protagonist – Jesus – to accomplish his task. Primary among them is the widow who demonstrates double grief as a bereaved widow. Her husband is dead and now her only son is dead. But her second affliction is remedied by Jesus' intervention. Another tritagonist in the event, the audience, demonstrates a character that both bears witness to and affirms the power of Jesus relative to some ancient miracle-working prophets. The crowd that follows Jesus to Nain, and the one that accompanies the widow on the way to the cemetery, demonstrate religious knowledge about miracles of raising the dead, thus a character that not only follows Jesus or the widow to the cemetery, but that could interpret the action and inaction of Jesus. This is a *referential* character.²⁵ The final tritagonist – the former dead young son – is very minor. He is a character who responds to a command by Jesus. In the context of Jesus as BNP, the character of the former dead young son is both *referential* and *mimical*.²⁶

3.2.3 Setting

The setting for the event is the city gate of Nain and seeks to define πόλις (city) in the Gospel of Luke. Here, the implied narrator refers to Nain as a city with a large population; it is a gated community and has a cemetery that is most likely located outside the city gate. Nain is receptive to itinerant religious personages and professionals such as coffin/casket bearers and funeral processors. The gate demonstrates a sense of security, and the cemetery outside the gate communicates an idea that the city's dead are buried in a designated place. This description fits a typical Greco-Roman composition of a city,²⁷ which is

22 Cf. Dinkler 2017, 687–706.

23 Cf. Barbour 1987, 307–27.

24 Cf. Croy 2011, 105.

25 Cf. Dinkler 2017, 694.

26 Cf. Dinkler 2017, 694.

27 Cf. Watson 2000, 212–5.

different from narratives in which πόλις is mentioned in conjunction with villages (χώμη), translated by the NRSV as “town.”

3.2.4 Discourse

The biblical Israelite *point of view* is portrayed in the narrative of the raising of the widow's son back to life. One important indication is the use of προφήτης (a key religious personage), which is not unique to a biblical Israelite *point of view* of the composition of the narrative. Προφήτης alone does not make the narrative portray the biblical Israelites' *point of view* because the phenomenon of προφήτης abounds in many societies of the ancient Mediterranean.²⁸ The combination of προφήτης and the πόλις Nain makes it a biblical Israelites' *point of view*. In other words, the implied narrator engaged biblical Israelites' geographico-religious personage as a filter through which the narrative was composed. A prophet is the mouthpiece of God in the Hebrew Bible, the most feared, respected and persecuted religious intermediary. Positions also exist in which false prophets were identified.²⁹ The mention of Νάϊν (Nain) and Ἰουδαία (Judea) also emphasise a biblical Israelites' *point of view*, being locations where predominantly biblical Israelites' domiciled. Hence, biblical Israelites or implied readers who are conversant with the geographical locations and cities of biblical Israelites, and the religious model of προφήτης, would have easily associated with the narrative. However, the protagonist – Jesus – does not observe the biblical Israelites' customary cleansing ritual when he touches the casket/coffin. By ignoring Jesus' compliance with corpse impurity rites (cf. Num 19:11), the implied narrator signals that ritual law is secondary to salvation – especially when the Bearer of Numinous Power (BNP) acts.³⁰

Although there is substantial disclosure, the implied narrator does leave out some details that would otherwise be insightful to the implied readers of the narrative. For example, the names of the widow and the dead son are not mentioned. The implied narrator reports that the dead son sits up and speaks; what he said, however, is not made known. This also reflects the non-disclosure of the name of the mother (the wife of Jairus) and the girl who was raised back to life in Luke 8:49–56. Even though knowledge of their names and identities may have helped in the authentication of the narrative, the implied narrator was not interested in the disclosure of the widow's and the son's names. Had Luke identified these women by name (the widow in 7:11–17; Jairus' wife in 8:40–56),

28 Cf. Aryeh 2019, 105–14.

29 Cf. Aryeh 2019, 82–96.

30 Cf. Davidson 2020, 8–28; Sprinkle 2000, 637–57; Iwanowska and Rucińska 2024, 75–81.

it would have accentuated his Gospel's emphasis on female witnesses. Their anonymity instead centres the miracles' theological significance.

Another detail the implied narrator does not report is the cause of death. Sicknesses that easily lead to the death of the victim are a critical area of study by scholars of miracle narratives in the New Testament. The implied narrator says that after the fact, the news about the miracle and Jesus spread to Judea and the surrounding country, but does not indicate the mechanism used to ascertain how the message spread. The miracle of raising the widow's son back to life is salvation for both the widow and the son. However, it is also bad news for the professional mourners and coffin/casket bearers. In ancient Mediterranean society, the services of mourners and casket/coffin bearers were hired at a fee.³¹ Unlike Jairus' daughter, who just died and whose plans for her were as yet to be determined, the narrative of the raising of the widow's son shows that he was confirmed to have been dead; the burial and funeral ceremonies were ongoing. About 80% of the narrative is in the voice of the implied narrator, the other 20% is direct speech by Jesus and the audience. If the direct speech is to be considered the core of the narrative, then it would read *μὴ κλαίε; νεανίσκε, σοὶ λέγω, ἐγέρθητι. Προφήτης μέγας ἡγέρθη ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ ὅτι ἐπεσκέψατο ὁ θεὸς τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ* (Weep not. Young man, I say to you, rise. A great prophet has risen among us and God has looked upon his people with favour).

4. Miracle as Salvation in Ghanaian Religio-Cultural Context

Miracles play a critical role in the patronage of the services of religious personages and shrines in the traditional Ghanaian religio-cultural milieu. The absence of a generally accepted scripture in traditional religion in Africa has given rise to the critical position of traditional priests who have access to the deities. This absence of scripture in traditional religions has the potential to let it evolve with changing times and concepts. Miracles are clues that determine the power or otherwise of a deity or a religious personage. Therefore, non-performing deities are neglected and performing deities are harnessed by offering timely sacrifices to them.³²

Within Ghanaian cosmology, salvation (*nkwaɔye* in Akan) transcends conventional Western dichotomies between spiritual and material existence. It encompasses a multi-dimensional understanding, concerned with harmony

31 Cf. Davidson 2020, 8–28.

32 Cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 41–54; Kärkkäinen and Kim, and Yong 2013, 41–54.

with the divine, ancestors, and spiritual forces after physical death; food security, shelter, clean water, and economic stability; freedom from disease, access to healing (traditional/herbal medicine), and physical vitality; family unity, community respect, and ancestral approval; and harmony with nature and land fertility. This framework rejects fragmented well-being. Salvation is incomplete if spiritual promises ignore hunger, sickness or poverty. A person is saved in the Ghanaian sense of *nkwa* (life) as integrated abundance, where divine favour manifests as practical sustenance and eternal security. *Nkwagye* (salvation) implies rescue from all life-threatening forces. *Nkwa* (life) refers to flourishing in both visible and invisible realms. Salvation includes ancestral ties, community standing, and land harmony as non-negotiable aspects of life. It affirms that salvation permeates every layer of existence.³³ Hence, religion must put food on the table, heal the sick, exorcise malevolent spirits, and provide the general well-being of its adherents through miracles. It constitutes salvation as an existential phenomenon, which makes miracles a lived religious activity and a centripetal factor in religion, particularly during a crisis.

The narrative of Jesus raising the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17) is appropriated within Ghanaian Akan cosmology as a paradigm of *nkwagye* (salvation), which transcends spiritual redemption to encompass holistic restoration: physical, social and economic. This interpretation emerges from the Akan worldview, where salvation (*nkwagye*) is inseparable from *nkwa* (life-in-fullness), demanding divine intervention in existential crises.³⁴

The widow's plight of losing her only son in a patriarchal economy mirrors the Akan emphasis on lineage continuity and social security. Jesus' unsolicited compassion and restoration of her son validate Akan theology's insistence that God (*Onyame*, *Nyame*) intervene where human systems fail. Jesus' touch of the bier (v.14), risking ritual impurity, signifies God's willingness to transgress boundaries to restore *nkwa*. It is God's divine compassion (*Ahummborɔ*) for vulnerable persons in society.³⁵ In Akan thought, individual death is a communal catastrophe. The son's resurrection thus becomes communal *nkwagye*. It restores the widow's social standing, economic viability and ancestral lineage. This aligns with Luke's framing of the miracle as a public witness (v.16), where salvation manifests as tangible flourishing. The crowd's acclamation "A great prophet has arisen among us!" (v.16) resonates with Akan categories of numinous authority. Jesus is appropriated as the Bearer of Numinous Power (BNP), who commands life (v.14) and overrides *abosom* (spiritual forces) of

33 Cf. Gyekye 1996, 161–6.

34 Cf. Bediako, 2000, 45.

35 Cf. Oduyoye, 1995, 103; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013, 78; Appiah-Kubi, 1991, 55.

death. His title “Lord” (v.13) reinforces his sovereignty (*Odomankoma Boafo*) over Ghanaian cosmological struggles. This framework positions Luke 7:11–17 as *nkwagye*, where salvation is embodied as Jesus’ power to restore all dimensions of broken life within the Akan cosmos.

In many Ghanaian societies, religion is life and life is religion. Miracles of healing and exorcism abound in traditional religions, but the miracle of resuscitation/raising the dead back to life is scarce. The legendary *Okomfo Anokye* of Awukugwa in the Eastern Region of Ghana performed several miracles of healing, exorcism and miracles on nature. However, he did not raise the dead back to life. At the point of his death, he informed his relatives that he was going on a seven-day journey to secure anti-death power, but he did not return.³⁶ This demonstrates the significance and sacredness of life and how the services of a traditional miracle worker who raises the dead back to life will be patronised. The services of *Okomfo Anokye* were sought by both poor and rich persons in society. Having the power to deal with death or to raise the dead back to life would have boosted the patronage of his services, but he never returned. This suggests how difficult it is to secure power over death. Hence, the services of Jesus to raise the dead back to life would be highly patronised in many traditional Ghanaian societies.

Conclusion

The raising of the widow’s son at Nain was communicated through rhetorical narration to demonstrate to the implied reader(s) that the power of Jesus transcends sicknesses, demons and even death. Jesus’ miracles are referred to as present salvation – *σήμερον σωτήρ* (Luke 19:10). It fulfils the same objective of the proclamation. Salvation is not restricted to the forgiveness of sins, and life after death, but is also the provision of existential needs, such as health, among others (4:38–41; 5:12–16; 7:1–17; 8:26–56). This salvation is found in the Christ who is Lord, and a prophet. Luke’s definition of miracle as salvation shares a common religio-cultural belief of many Ghanaians. The miracles of Jesus do not only serve a historical purpose but also an existential purpose to sustain life in good condition and satisfaction. It reflects the concept of religion in Africa as a lived phenomenon. The purpose of miracles in Luke as salvation in the natural world shares a common ethos with salvation in the African/Ghanaian religio-cultural traditions. Thus, although there is medication for illnesses in the Ghanaian Akan context of religion, there is hardly a

³⁶ Cf. Aryeh 2019, 9.

medicine for the miracle of bringing the dead back to life. Traditional religionists can hardly be found raising the dead back to life. This makes Jesus a crucial religious figure who has the power to raise the dead. In Akan thought, his compassion for the widow through the restoration of her son brings her joy and demonstrates attention to the vulnerable during a crisis.

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Love in a Segregated World: Luke 10:25–37 and Interfaith Dialogue

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Introduction

Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana are a critical component of the country's national cohesion and stability.¹ Christian and Muslim leaders often collaborate in joint actions for social development and advocacy for political stability, quality health care, economic justice, and peaceful coexistence.² However, some factors pose threats to Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana, including the worrisome developments of religious extremism around West Africa with its attendant exclusivist teachings.³ Religious extremism and exclusivity promote the fear and suspicion of the 'other', encouraging isolation and "widening the relationship gap between adherents of the two religions."⁴

This paper thus elucidates the theological importance of the good Samaritan's compassionate attitude towards 'the other' within a segregated environment where ethnic groupings, religious affiliation and social status are the yardstick for human identity.⁵ Narrative analysis⁶ is employed to examine the text and its perlocutionary effect on the 'original' reader.⁷ Furthermore, through an intercultural reading of Luke 10:25–37, this paper explores how

1 Cf. Anquandah 2009, 67.

2 Cf. Yakubu 2006, 103; Anquandah 2009, 70; Christian Council of Ghana 2020, 70–5.

3 Cf. Ojo 2007, 2; Kalu 1995, 79.

4 Cf. Ossom-Batsa 2006, 95; cf. also Yakubu 2006, 103; Bediako 2004, 5.

5 The ethics of the parable of the Good Samaritan has endeared the parable for intercultural, interracial and interreligious studies. Cf. Michael 2019, 444; Nadler 2007, 260; McFarland 2001, 62.

6 For more details on narrative criticism, cf. Resseguie 2005, 17–39; Marguerat and Bourquin 1999, 4–17.

7 The speech-act theory (Austin 1975) is employed in the Communicative approach to biblical hermeneutics. The approach was developed by George Ossom-Batsa, Nicoletta Gatti and graduate students of the Biblical Section (Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana). It is an African interpretation of the Bible, which seeks to glean the transformative impact of the Bible on readers and the society. Cf. Ossom-Batsa 2006, 91–134; Gatti 2021, 257–8; Gatti 2017, 46–67.

the parable can drive Christians and Muslims in Ghana to challenge their understanding of ‘neighbour’ and reflect on meaningful ways to become ‘good Samaritans’ to each other.

1. Delimitation and Structure

Scholars locate Luke 10:25–37 as part of the large literary unit of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem captured in Luke 9:51–19:40.⁸ The setting of the story shifts from Jesus’ address to his disciples (10:1–24) to a question posed by a Jewish lawyer (v.25).⁹ The dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer focuses on love for both God and neighbour,¹⁰ and employs different genres, discussion and narrative, through the inclusion of a parable.¹¹

This hermeneutical choice challenges the readers to enquire into the reason behind the communicative strategy employed by Jesus and the perlocutionary effect of the parable. It may be useful to start with the etymology of the verb *παραβάλλω*, from which the noun *παραβολή* derives. The term is ambiguous; it can mean either “to throw besides, to place beside,” from which we derive “to compare,” or conversely “to throw off the right path, to deceive.”¹² The parable “is thus a comparison that can bring about an encounter, but can also create a clash of language, throw one off course.”¹³

Parables are constructed to have an effect on the readers by transposing them into the fictitious world of the narrative to experience it. The reader is then transferred back into real life to face the reality that the parabolist had in mind in telling the story.¹⁴ Thus, parables have what Toker calls “parallel experience,”¹⁵ the ‘ability’ to transfer the direct intent and purposes, the mood, and the atmosphere of the setting of the story to contemporary readers. Zimmermann summarises the discussion indicating that “the aim of the parable is to instigate the process of understanding. Although a certain structuring

8 Cf. Johnson 1991, 171; Forbes 2000, 55; Rowe 2006, 23.

9 Cf. Forbes 2000, 55.

10 Unlike Mark 12:30 and Matt 22:37, where love for God and love for neighbour are separated as first and second commandments, respectively, Luke seams them into one. According to Johnson, the two commandments are “interwoven cords that cannot be separated,” thus, “love for God” has the same force as “love for neighbour” (Johnson 1991, 174).

11 Cf. Ellis 2003, 158; Evans 1990, 464.

12 Schüle 2011, 205–16.

13 Iovino 1999, 214.

14 Cf. Dinkler 2013, 146; Bovon 2013, 56.

15 Toker 1993, 4.

already takes place on the literary level, the meaning of each parable must ultimately be discovered anew by every *reader*.¹⁶

Most scholars agree that their meanings are indirect and usually convey mysterious messages that are difficult to decipher because of the ambiguities that characterise them.¹⁷ These ambiguities are usually the creation of the original storytellers who use silence, delay and even omissions to challenge their readers to make decisions and conclusions at the end of the parable.

In the text under study, the parable is part of a dialogue between Jesus and an anonymous lawyer. It is interesting to note the alternation of literary genres, indicated by the use of rhetorical devices and temporal forms. Following Weinrich's textual linguistics analysis, we can recognise the movement from 'discussion' to 'narrative,' which marks the narrative rhythm and determines the relationship that the readers establish with the text. In Weinrich's hypothesis, the author uses this movement to guide the readers in the reception of the text.¹⁸ While the discussion questions the readers directly, creating tension and a defence reaction,¹⁹ the parable involves the interlocutor indirectly, avoiding the emergence of defence mechanisms and transferring him to a world that is similar but not identical to the real situation. In this world, the interlocutor pronounces a 'judgement' and makes an evaluation before being transferred back to the real world.²⁰ The aim is to illuminate a difficult situation in which he finds himself and to provoke a change of mentality.²¹

The proposed structure of the text reflects the 'journey' of the readers from the 'discussion' to the world of the parable, and back to the 'discussion' to delineate the tenets of the parable:

1. The first dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer (vv.25–29).
2. The parable (vv.30–35).
3. The second dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer (vv.36–37).²²

¹⁶ Zimmermann 2015, 18.

¹⁷ As recognised by Zimmermann, parables are a hermeneutics challenge because "parable speech is incomprehensible and mysterious" (Zimmermann 2015, 3; cf. Dinkler 2013, 147).

¹⁸ Cf. Weinrich 2023, 446.

¹⁹ Cf. Weinrich 2023, 49.

²⁰ Cf. Fusco 1982, 63.

²¹ Cf. Fusco 1982, 125.

²² Cf. Bovon 2013, 52–3.

2. First Dialogue Between Jesus and the Lawyer: Luke 10:25–29

Luke chapter 10 opens with the mission of the seventy disciples to heal the sick, preach the kingdom, and proclaim peace (10:1–12). When the disciples report their experience, Jesus rejoices in the spirit and gives thanks to God for hiding “these things from the wise and prudent” (v.21). The narrative suggests that “these things” could be tenets of the kingdom of God and eternal life, and envisions an investigation of them by a “wise and prudent” person. This is paradigmatic of Luke because he constantly provides a precedent for later plot development, thereby creating a prophecy fulfilment pattern even within a single narrative.²³

Hence, it comes to the reader as no surprise that after Jesus’ private statement to his disciples (vv.23–24), a lawyer (νομικός) makes inquiries about eternal life (v.25). The lawyer, therefore, is a good example of a ‘wise and prudent’ person from whom ‘these things’ have been hidden (10:21)! To further portray him in a negative light, Luke informs his readers that the purpose of his question is to test Jesus. Moreso, his desire to justify himself later (v.29) instead of obeying Jesus’ command (v.28) shows that calling Jesus a διδάσκαλος was only a “mock respect.”²⁴ The reader is not disconcerted that, unlike Mark, Luke weakens Jesus’ praise of him (cf. Mark 12:34)²⁵ but immediately points his attention to the Torah: “What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?” (v.26).²⁶

The lawyer answers Jesus by quoting Deut 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ...,” and Lev 19:18, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus’ affirmation of the lawyer’s answer and his command to him to do what the law requires (v.28) reminds the audience of the importance of obeying the Torah.²⁷ But it appears that the lawyer’s interest is not to obey the Torah but to justify himself as an esteemed person in a ‘class’ society; thus, he seeks to make further inquiries about who his neighbour is.

The question, “Who is my neighbour?” (v.29) should be understood against the backdrop of the book of Leviticus. Mensah observes that “neighbour in Lev 19:17–18 is covenantal in character, that is, it is exclusive to those who belong to the household of Israel.”²⁸ However, the concept is widened in

²³ Cf. Johnson 1991, 139.

²⁴ Forbes 2000, 59; cf. Orton 1999, 5.

²⁵ Cf. Orton 1999, 50.

²⁶ As a Jewish scholar, the lawyer was familiar with both the civil law and the written Torah. Cf. Mensah 2019, 50.

²⁷ Cf. Mensah 2019, 50.

²⁸ Cf. Mensah 2019, 51.

Lev 19:33–34 where the Israelites are commanded to treat foreigners as their neighbours and love them as their own, thus broadening its understanding to include non-Israelites.²⁹ Consequently, it seems that the narrator intends to use the lawyer's question to illustrate, through the parable, that love for the 'other' expresses God's will for humankind. In this regard, Michael has stated that "whilst most religions and cultures in ancient times would have defined neighbourliness in terms of blood relationship, cultural connections or religious affiliations, this parable directly challenged these settled conceptions of neighbourliness and distanced neighbourliness from these familiar spaces."³⁰

The lawyer's question, therefore, creates an enabling platform for Luke to invite Jesus' Jewish hearers, including the 'wise and prudent' lawyer, into the world of the parable.³¹

3. The Parable: Luke 10:30–35

The person attacked by the robbers is described as "a certain man" (ἄνθρωπος τις). He has no name, religious background or nationality. But Johnson is undoubtedly right when he calls him a "travelling Judean"³² because of the socio-cultural context of the narrative, and especially, because a Samaritan was the hero of the story at the end.

A certain priest (ἱερεὺς τις) travelled the same road, from Jerusalem to Jericho, "and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side" (v.31). The priest, being a symbol of Jewish leadership, contravened the Torah by neglecting the wounded man (Lev 19). The aorist participle ἰδὼν suggests that the priest had a clear view of the man and noticed that he was not dead, but did not offer any help. A predominant assessment of the priest's decision is that he was concerned about being ritually unclean (Lev 21–22). However, as Mensah has stated, "preserving ritual purity was not an excuse for a priest moving away from Jerusalem, who most likely was returning from his temple duties."³³ Bauckham's defence for the priest is that he was obeying the law, which forbade him from touching a corpse (Lev 21:1–3).³⁴ This too is insufficient reason because according to the text, the man was not dead (ἡμιθνή). The priest was

29 Cf. Mensah 2019, 51; Zimmermann 2015, 314–5.

30 Michael 2019, 445; cf. Borg 1994, 80.

31 Cf. McFarland 2001, 3.

32 Johnson 1991, 175.

33 See the elaborate explanation of the priest's actions and inactions in Mensah 2019, 53.

34 Cf. Bauckham 1998, 479.

probably concerned about his comfort, or perhaps he was afraid of being a victim of another attack in that lonely place. However, the narrator does not provide reasons for the priest's action, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps.

Luke continues the story by introducing a Levite to the scene. Like the priests, the Levites "... performed weeklong services in the temple, which included the singing of psalms, guarding the temple gates (*m. Mid.* 1:1; 2:5), and teaching (2 Chron 17:7–9; Neh 8:7–9)."³⁵ The Levites did not offer any sacrifices and, therefore, were not subject to the same purity law as the priests. Even though the Levite also saw the wounded man, he ignored him and "passed on the other side" (καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ἀντιπαρήλθεν, v.32). The failure of the two religious leaders echoes the narrator's emphasis on love for the 'other' over ethnic, religious or social class systems created in that society to enhance segregation. The narrator, again, does not state reasons for the Levite's action but introduces another traveller to the scene.

Jesus' audience would have expected a rabbi or at least an ordinary Jew to be the hero where religious leaders had failed, but it turns out to be a Samaritan.³⁶ Culpepper rightly notes that the action of the Samaritan challenged Jesus' Jewish audience to break any form of exclusion against others who were different from them, especially Samaritans.³⁷ The Jews would have been surprised to know that the Samaritan, considered unfaithful to the Torah, is the only one obedient to it.³⁸ Wall, to this end, observes thus, "the heterodox Samaritan proved to be the Torah observant neighbour"³⁹ rather than the priest and the Levite.

When the Samaritan reaches the scene, he feels compassion for the wounded man (καὶ ἰδὼν ἐσπλαγχνίσθη). He perceives the man as a 'person',⁴⁰ and therefore is motivated to use his resources to help him, bringing him into an inn to ensure his safety and healing. The verb σπλαγχνίζομαι, employed to describe the compassion of the Samaritan, is used for the deep empathy that Jesus felt for the widow who lost her only son in the city of Nain (ὁ κύριος ἐσπλαγχνίσθη ἐπ' αὐτῇ – 7:13; cf. 15:20). Thus, Luke equates the Samaritan's compassion to the attitude of Jesus to portray the Samaritan in a positive light whilst articulating the failure of the religious leaders.

35 Zimmermann 2015, 308–9.

36 Cf. Mensah 2019, 174; Zimmermann 2015, 314–5.

37 Cf. Culpepper 1995, 490; Michael 2019, 444.

38 Cf. Bauckham 1998, 487.

39 Wall 1989, 22; cf. Michael 2019, 444.

40 Cf. Choi 2022, 201.

The Samaritan does not see the man through the lens of ethnicity, religion or societal status, but instead views him as one who “deserves abundant love.”⁴¹ The “perceived impure person”⁴² is closer to God because he exhibits the same compassion that Jesus exhibited.⁴³ By choosing a Samaritan, Jesus breaks down the “boundaries between Jew and Samaritan, but most of all He makes the claim that whoever responds to human need is a true child of God and an example of love for the neighbour.”⁴⁴ From Luke’s perspective, the Samaritan thinks and acts like God, and as Culpepper points out, his action shows that community living should not be defined by class – priests, Levites, poor, rich, religion, etc., but by common humanity.⁴⁵ The action of the Samaritan challenges the revered lawyer who must now face the reality of who a neighbour is.

4. Second Dialogue between Jesus and the Lawyer: Luke 10:36–37

Jesus’ question – “Which of these three do you think was neighbour to him who fell among robbers?” – is meant to invite the lawyer and Jesus’ audience to experience the world of the parable. The lawyer answered Jesus by saying, “the one who had mercy on him.” He refuses to mention the name ‘Samaritan’, but rather chooses to describe him by his act, perhaps because he considers the parable offensive to him or the Jewish people. Nonetheless, Jesus ends his conversation with the lawyer with an invitation to imitate the behaviour of the Samaritan: πορεύου καὶ σὺ ποίει ὁμοίως (10:37).

Luke employs an open-ended narrative style to the parable⁴⁶ and does not indicate the final reaction of the lawyer, whether he went away sad (cf. Matt 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22), or mocks Jesus and leaves the scene,⁴⁷ or perhaps embraces Jesus’ advice to “go and do likewise” (10:37). “Go and do likewise” places an obligation on the lawyer to become a neighbour to others who may not be in his ethnic, religious or societal ‘class’.⁴⁸ To this end, Fletcher-Louis observes that the parable “redefines the people of God to open

41 Choi 2022, 201; cf. Appiah 2005, 112.

42 Mensah 2019, 55.

43 Cf. Johnson 1991, 75.

44 Hultgren 2000, 98.

45 Cf. Culpepper 1995, 229.

46 This is paradigmatic of Luke: e.g. 5:34–39; 6:39–49; 12:16–21; 14:7–24; 15:1–32; 18:1–14; 19:11–27; cf. Nadella 2011, 77.

47 Cf. Dinkler 2013, 151.

48 Cf. McFarland 2001, 60.

up the boundaries to include a Samaritan.”⁴⁹ Additionally, the parable presents a “remapping of the boundary lines around God’s people by challenging the exclusive border drawn around God’s people and including persons traditionally located outside of these drawn borders.”⁵⁰ This also coheres with Johnson’s explanation that Jesus’ point in the story was that his audience relate with others from the perspective of love and compassion and not from a ‘class system’.⁵¹ The perlocutionary intention of the evangelist is to challenge Jesus’ audience and the Lukan community to break away from ‘categorisation’ and ‘classes’, and to see humanity in every person, thus exhibiting God’s compassion to all manner of people.

5. Implications for Christian-Muslim Relations in Ghana

The Ghanaian Christian, as a contemporary reader of the Lukan text, is also faced with a similar socio-cultural and interreligious context that has the propensity to promote segregation. Consequently, the text has significant implications for interreligious dialogue in Ghana. Contextualising the text in the Ghanaian interreligious space enhances not only peaceful coexistence but also promotes a society that seeks the welfare of the ‘other’, learning how to *become* a neighbour (γενέσθαι; 10:36).⁵²

Sarbah recently asserted that “even though twenty-first-century Africa is characterised by secularisation, globalisation and modernity, religion remains the main driving force.”⁵³ Some scholars argue that secularism will eventually eliminate religion from public life in Africa,⁵⁴ but Bediako objected that the incorporation of new knowledge in science and technology in Africa’s religious worldview “has not displaced the basic view that the whole universe in which human existence takes place is fundamentally spiritual.”⁵⁵ Thus, Africans still hold religion as “the heart and soul of their culture, and most importantly, in the sense of spirituality.”⁵⁶ For example, in Ghana, phrases such as ‘Allah is Great’, ‘Jesus is my Protector’, ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’, are often seen decorating cars and shops. Furthermore, the names of many basic schools also

49 Fletcher-Louis 2003, 50.

50 Michael 2019, 445.

51 Cf. Johnson 1991, 75.

52 Cf. Zimmermann 2015, 324–5; see the definition of ‘neighbour’ in Lévinas 1987, 151.

53 Sarbah 2023, 55.

54 Cf. Lewis 2017, 91; Trimmingham 1966, 130.

55 Bediako 1995, 176.

56 Sarbah 2023, 56; Montilus 1990, 78.

have religious connotations: Garden of Eden International and Seed of Faith Montessori, for example.⁵⁷

Ghana is a religiously pluralistic society with the majority being Christians, totalling 71.3% of the population.⁵⁸ Due to the considerable percentage of Muslims (19.9%), a healthy interfaith relationship between Muslims and Christians could contribute immensely to the peace and development of the nation. Christians and Muslims have exclusive tendencies based on their traditions and belief systems, but they share fundamental beliefs like peace, love and advocacy for the marginalised, which have enabled their interrelations for many years.⁵⁹ Notwithstanding such common belief systems that have facilitated good relations, exclusive inclinations have also contributed to segregation among their adherents even to the point of violence.⁶⁰

Though a biblical narrative, the parable has similarities with the Ghanaian interreligious space. Therefore, implications such as compassion, respect and support towards the 'other' can be derived from it to facilitate the cohesion of Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana. The first similarity is, however, the preference of Jesus for 'narrative' over 'discussion'. In the African environment, communication starts always from experience, from sharing the 'common stories' and 'narrating our own story':

The stories we tell of our hurts and joys are sacred. Telling them make us vulnerable but without this sharing we cannot build community and solidarity. Our stories are precious paths on which we have walked with God and struggled for a passage to our full humanity. They are events through which we have received the blessings of life from the hands of God. The stories we tell are sacred, for they are indications of how we struggled with God. ... We share our stories with you as people who believe that true community thrives where there is sharing in solidarity.⁶¹

57 Cf. Ossom-Batsa 2007, 94.

58 Yakubu defines Religious Pluralistic Society as the coexistence of many religions within a given society without necessarily generating consensus (cf. Yakubu 2006, 103; Ghana Statistic Service 2021).

59 Cf. Almirzanah 2021, 10; Yakubu 2006, 103; Bernhardt 2015, 71.

60 Christian Council of Ghana's annual report in 2004 indicated that the 1980s through 2000 saw the eruption of violence and conflicts in several parts of the country including Kumasi, Sekondi, Wa, Wenchi, and Accra.

61 Oduyoye 2001, 21; cf. Hof 2016, 255.

In this way, interreligious dialogue, becomes ‘narrative theology’ to create a space free of fear and judgment in which to see the ‘others’, to listen to them and to start a journey together, as the following sections indicate.

5.1 Compassion Towards the ‘Other’

The call to action of the text challenges Luke’s readers to break ethnic boundaries and discriminations and exhibit compassion, even to those perceived as ‘outsiders’. Esler rightly observes that the Good Samaritan’s attitude “drives one to conclude that compassion which transcends legally sanctioned ethnic boundaries and discriminations when faced with real human need is a superior form of human behaviour than continuing to live within their limits.”⁶² Thus, the Lukan narrator presents the Samaritan and others who show compassion to the human ‘other’ as possessors of the compassionate heart of Jesus (7:13). As exemplified by the Samaritan, Ghanaian Christians and Muslims are challenged to ‘see’ and show compassion towards the ‘other’ by breaking the ethnic and religious ‘barriers’ that keep them apart.

5.2 Resources for the Betterment of the ‘Other’

The call to action of the text also depicts the significance of resource sharing in the Lukan community (vv.34–35). Jesus’ audience is enjoined ‘to do the same’ to better the lives of people they encounter, even at the peril of their own lives. Fr. Campbell, a Catholic Missionary in Ghana, epitomised this when he built a mosque for Muslims at the Weija leprosarium in Accra. This unusual gesture by a Christian priest speaks eloquently about meeting the needs of the ‘other’ without any motive of future recompense, just like the Samaritan. Mission schools in Ghana (both Christian and Islamic) also continue to admit students of each faith into their schools to study for a better future. Such opportunities given to people of other faiths should not be dependent on conversion to the other religion but should hinge on love for the person as a human being who needs support, just like the attitude of the Samaritan.

5.3 Respect and Appreciation for the ‘Other’

The parable’s call to action permeates all faiths, cultures, nationalities, genders and races. It symbolises an attitude of respect and appreciation for people

62 Esler 2000, 335.

of different cultures and faiths.⁶³ The Samaritan's compassionate attitude towards a 'stranger' is an expressive act against all forms of segregation exhibited against people of different faiths and cultures. Jesus used the parable to elucidate his call for respect and appreciation for the humanity of people who do not belong to 'our families'. Accordingly, Muslims and Christians are entreated to build constructive relations among themselves through mutual respect for one another. They are to eschew the perpetration of violence against each other.

5.4 Support and Solidarity Towards the 'Other'

The text exemplifies Jesus' call for support and solidarity amongst people who are 'different' from each other. Jesus' statement, "Go and do likewise" portrays Luke's quest for the community to show support and care towards one another notwithstanding societal or religious differences. It thus challenges Christians and Muslims to show support, comfort, and solidarity to one another. Support should not be prejudiced based on religious or societal status but should be founded on a person's love and care towards humanity. Christian-Muslim relations should work for the common good of persons, where the 'other' finds comfort and support in challenging times. The National Chief Imam of Ghana, Sheikh Dr. Osman Nuhu Sharubutu exemplified interfaith harmony when he attended a Catholic Church on Easter Sunday in 2019 to foster unity. Such a show of solidarity is important to maintain the cohesion of Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana.

5.5 Religious Piety Versus Love for the 'Other'

The Priest and Levite in the story neglect their 'compassionate duty' towards their fellow man. As religious leaders, they are expected to exhibit the highest standard of love and compassion, but fail because of their attachment to their 'religiousness'. Luke reminds these religious leaders that they cannot claim to love God if they neglect their duty to ensure the well-being of their neighbours. The narrative calls on Muslim and Christian clerics to value the lives of persons under their care and to ensure their well-being in times of distress. It shows that God places value on showing mercy rather than performing religious sacrifices (cf. Hos 6:6; Matt 9:13) and challenges them to be good examples in the promotion of peaceful and impactful Christian-Muslim relations.

63 Cf. Kahl 2018, 10.

Conclusion

This paper is an exegetical and theological analysis of Luke 10:25–37, and its implications for Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana. Reflecting on the narrative, this paper concludes that the perlocutionary effect of the text challenges Christians and Muslims to eschew segregation and build a ‘classless’ society where people are judged not by their ethnic or religious affiliations but by the common denominator of love. The perlocutionary effect of the text is to transform the Lukan community and, in our context, Ghanaian society by following the compassionate example of the Good Samaritan.

The failure of the Jewish religious leaders in the parable serves as a caution to Christian and Muslim clerics to become examples of love and support for the ‘other’ by emulating the life of the Samaritan. The attitude of the Samaritan challenges Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana: The focus should move beyond peaceful coexistence to taking intentional proactive steps that can ensure the well-being, safety, and security of the ‘other’.

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Water in the Well and Living Water in Samaria (John 4:1–26): A Model for an Intercultural-Biblical Response for Salvation in Crisis-Ridden Africa

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Introduction

Samaria writhes in crisis, and the solution dramatically unfolds at Jacob's well. There, the Johannine author presents a literary narrative that involves two types of water: well water "this water" (ὕδατος τούτου, John 4:13) and "living water" (ὕδωρ ζῶν, 4:10c). It can be observed that these play critical metaphoric and symbolic roles in the unfolding of our text. They represent the solution to the two crisis levels that the episode exposes and handles.

Scholarship has generally focused on the differences between the two waters that our narrative describes. Thus, scholars tend to emphasise the limitation of the well water, while highlighting the spiritual value of Jesus' "living water." Thus, I would like to explore a nuance to these waters: their implicit unity and common associations with the idea of gift and to give. Therefore, the salvation of God in the crisis-ridden world can be symbolically associated with the gifts of two waters, Jacob's well water and Jesus' "living water." They respectively represent God's creative and recreative generosity and provisions for his children's biological and spiritual lives.

In this article, therefore, employing a narrative approach, we shall engage in an exposition of the two waters and the inherent crisis in our text through a literary, structural and theological analysis of 4:1–26.¹ This will enable us to expose the intrinsic crisis in this narrative² set in Samaria. Subsequently, we shall also examine how Jesus reveals God's salvation in this crisis-ridden city. We shall propose the result of our analysis as a paradigm for the actualisation

1 The well as the setting for this narrative might remind us of dialogues at the wells in the Old Testament. However, the idea that our narrative could be projecting a marriage motif as in the Old Testament, where dialogues at the wells eventually led to marriage, does not appear tenable here (cf. Gen 24:42–47; 29:1–14; Exod 2:15–22). The text does not indicate that Jesus ends up marrying the Samaritan woman. For further reading cf. Brown 1966, 171; Boismard and Lamouille 1977, 128.

2 Cf. Davidson 2005, 159–68.

of God's salvation as a missionary endeavour worldwide, and particularly in Africa. And so, with an intercultural biblical response that focuses on Africa, we shall expose how God inspires us to make both the natural and the living waters of salvation flow freely in Africa.

1. Literary Analysis

We can observe that John 4:7–15 makes the well water and Jesus' living water the objects of the verb "to give," which occurs eight times in the verses indicated. John employs them at the first level of the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The first use of this verb comes from Jesus, in his request to the Samaritan woman saying, "give me to drink" (δός μοι πεῖν, 4:7). There is also one occurrence of the nominal form "gift" (τὴν δωρεάν, 4:10). Going further, the text employs the verb, "to give," seven other times: 2x in the if-conditional sentence of v.10; 1x in v.12; 2x in v.14; and 1x in v.15. Consequently, we can observe the association of the two waters in this narrative with the action of giving and the noun "gift." Therefore, given the implicit crisis, which this narrative subtly exposes, "the gift" and the giving of water contribute to the literary presentation of the solution being proposed.

The Johannine author employs Jesus and the Samaritan woman as major characters in the unfolding process and actualisation of salvation in crisis-ridden Samaria. Okure has joined the fate of Jesus and the Samaritan woman together by affirming what she calls their "experience of rejection."³ For that reason, she invites them to make a trip to Africa, which is often considered a rejected continent.⁴ I hesitate to tie Jesus and the Samaritan woman together with a rope of rejection. The literary narrative featuring the figures of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and even the Samaritans, exposes the much deeper reality of God's practical response to the human covert and overt need for salvation in a crisis-ridden world. As this narrative demonstrates, the Johannine author tends to dramatise this reality for pragmatic purposes. Consequently, apart from the Johannine use of dialogue, which is one of his characteristic literary forms,⁵ he also develops the content on a deeper level, exposing Jesus'

³ Okure 2009, 409.

⁴ Cf. Okure 2009, 402–18.

⁵ For an enumeration and explanation of the literary techniques John employs to achieve this narrative discourse, cf. Ellis 1985, 68. Also Kuate 2018, 36.

Christological identity and import.⁶ This is why the structure of this narrative can be generally divided into two: the exposition of the human biological and spiritual crisis, and its water-symbolic and metaphoric solutions. We shall shortly dwell on this structure below. However, let us first explore other literary features of our narrative.

Now, we turn to the literary contents of this narrative, which concern the marital status of the Samaritan woman, her perceptions about Jesus, and the Lord's final revelation of himself to her (vv.19–26). These elements are also essential to this episode's literary unfolding and meaning.⁷ The dialogue in the narrative dwells on the social life of the Samaritan woman (4:16–18), on the relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews (4:9, 20–22) and Jesus' Christological identity (4:19–26). Consequently, for the soteriological implication of this narrative, it is necessary to highlight the harmony among the social, historical and Christological factors in the episode. The exclusive focus on the Samaritan woman based on her gender neither shields women from moral failures and spiritual crises nor does it establish that men deny their own moral shortcomings and spiritual crises. The beautiful wholeness and unity of this narrative, both literally and on the level of meaningful interpretation, flow from the fact that in the end, the Samaritan people, who go to meet Jesus, must have been made up of women and men (4:30). And Jesus must have interacted with both women and men, and perhaps children, when he arrives in the Samaritan town and even spends some days there (4:40).

Conclusively, a comprehensive literary analysis of our narrative reveals that our text is better studied within the context of inclusivity and the holistic examination of all its literary and structural elements. The interpreters of our composition can only do justice to the text by avoiding elevating certain features in it to the detriment of others. Thus, we can observe that our narrative exposes the crisis in the world that affects both women and men. Consequently, it presents Jesus' salvific solution to the reality of human

6 Kuate reflects on and exposes Jesus' christological nature and manifestation as “a dialogue between God and people,” and “his incarnation” also as a “dialogue between God and humanity,” cf. Kuate 2018, 35–6.

7 The recent analysis of this narrative appears to emphasise the role of the Samaritan woman to the exclusion of Jesus' function, which is the most important aspect of the dialogue. The supposed boldness of the woman to speak courageously with Jesus appears to shift the attention away from the major point of the dialogue, which is Jesus' role in the unfolding of salvation, and is the main goal of the narrative in general and the dialogue in particular. Consequently, I agree with Toan Do that “too much” from “outside the world of the text” or “the world behind the text” has “been drawn into the interpretation” of the composition (cf. Do 2019, 254–5).

moral and spiritual failures. Thus, there is the prospect of establishing a new socio-cultural, religious-spiritual, and moral-political order, which would benefit both Samaritans and Jews, and by extension, all the peoples of the world.

2. Structural Analysis

The structural analysis embraces the full text of 4:1–42. The purpose is to capture the wider context of the narrative, which demonstrates that it is not the Samaritan woman alone to whom Jesus offers the possibility of salvation, but also all the Samaritans and the entire world. The universal aspect of the soteriological offer can be observed in Jesus' dialogue with his disciples, where the Lord points to the imagery of the already ripe grain waiting to be harvested (4:31–38). The analysis will underscore the levels of the crisis in the episode, where John narratively reveals Jesus' manifest salvific presence.

We can observe at least three levels of crisis that our narrative exposes, namely: the implicit personal turmoil of the Samaritan woman; the general crisis in Samaria; and the universal crisis of the entire world, which needs salvation. Therefore, Samaria in particular, and the world at large, manifest the crisis, which qualifies them as missionary territories in need of Jesus' saving intervention.⁸ John 4:1–42 exposes these crises through two major dialogues between Jesus and the Samaritan woman and between Jesus and his disciples. There is also evidence of a Johannine literary characteristic in this episode, as shown by the character of Jesus slipping into a monologue (4:34–38). For this article, we shall restrict our deeper analysis to 4:1–26. We shall only make a broad reference to 4:27–42 in this subsection as an integral part of the narrative and in the context of 4:1–26.

According to the content, literary pattern and structural divisions of our text, it can be observed that the author introduces the passage with a brewing crisis concerning Jesus and John the Baptist (4:1–6). John develops the story along the lines of a broader crisis, which he exposes in two major dialogues (4:10–37). Finally, the text reaches a denouement by presenting a harmonious community of faith around Jesus (4:39–42). The first suggestion of crisis indicates why Jesus leaves Judea and begins the journey to Galilee (4:1–3). Albeit continuing with his public ministry, Jesus may have been avoiding a conflict

⁸ Among other things, it can be recognised that Samaria is a missionary city for both Jesus and his disciples after him, cf. Okure 1988. Also, Keener 2003, 588.

with the Pharisees.⁹ However, the indication of discord is implicitly present between Jesus and the Pharisees, but this manifests itself clearly in John 5.

Our text's first sign of crisis concerns John the Baptist's and Jesus' respective ministries. The Pharisees suggest that there is a contest between Jesus and John the Baptist. However, the insinuation of crisis at the beginning of this narrative might not be unconnected with the unfolding unbelief (the crisis of faith), which contrasts with the Johannine intention for his Gospel (20:30–31).¹⁰ Finally, John anticipates the example of faith that the Samaritans will demonstrate later in the final unfolding of the narrative (4:39–41).

Now, Jesus arrives in Samaria (4:4–5). The positioning of Jesus has been described as John's literary compositional interlude¹¹ for the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritans. It also sets the stage for unfolding our narrative episodic plot. Consequently, we can observe and describe the biological crisis of weariness, thirst and a lack of drinking water, which hit Jesus and probably forced him to sit at Jacob's well.

The author intensifies Jesus' physical and biological crisis by indicating that he has no bucket and rope with which to draw water from Jacob's deep well (4:6). Subsequently, the author introduces a major character into the narrative, identified simply as a Samaritan woman (4:7).¹² She brings a bucket and probably a rope with which to draw some water from the well (4:4, 11). However, her arrival increases the tension, making the narrative appear like an episode of a progressively deepening crisis. Not willing to be generous enough to give Jesus a drink of water, the woman refers to the strained relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans in a bid to justify being critical of Jesus' request for a drinking water from her (4:9). The dialogue that follows exposes the type of crisis, which the woman's bucket and rope, as well as the water from Jacob's well, cannot address. Jesus' "living water," which he alone can give, serves as the only salvific solution to the unfolding crisis. Moreover, this gift is the climax of Jacob's historical gift of a well to the Samaritans. It can be seen as a biological foretaste of the spiritual gift of salvation as symbolised by "the living water" (4:10).

9 For an observation that the menace of the Pharisees is gathering momentum, cf. Ellis 1985, 63.

10 "... The author's chief concern is the faith of the reader. ..." (Moloney 1998, 179).

11 "In the sequence of the Samaritan woman, the literary and dramatic techniques the evangelist uses are so varied, abundant, and artistic that they represent practically a showcase of his talent" (Ellis 1985, 68).

12 Brown presents what he describes as a "curious interpretation" by Bligh, which suggests that the Samaritan woman has a crush on Jesus. That makes her lie about her marital status (Brown 1966, 171). See also Edwards 2014, 125–6.

According to 4:7–25, the crisis that unfolds spreads across two geographical locations: Samaria and Jerusalem. These two places, respectively, relate to the Samaritan woman and Jesus (a Jew). Therefore, geography and characterisation play significant dramatic, narrative and poetic¹³ roles in the exposition of crises in our discourse. Consequently, the primary evidence of the crisis in the first structural division of the text (the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman) flows from its literary pattern. It highlights the polemical dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews and also underscores the apologetic debate concerning Mount Gerizim of Samaria in Sychar and the Jerusalem of the Jews concerning which of these two locations is the true place to worship God (4:20).¹⁴

Consequently, by employing the poetic form of parallelism¹⁵ involving a Samaritan woman and a Jew (Jesus), the Johannine author seems to personify the crisis in Samaria. Therefore, the debates do not come across as abstract or imaginary, focusing exclusively on historical, sociocultural, religious, or even political issues. As a result, the crisis becomes tangible, experiential, and immediate in Samaria (4:9).¹⁶ John also demonstrates the depth of this crisis through the unfolding dialogue between the Samaritan woman and Jesus at Jacob's well.

3. Crisis: Water-Metaphoric and Symbolic Solution

A lot has been said and written concerning the context of John 4:1–42.¹⁷ Thus, we wish to focus on the context surrounding the crisis in the text and the symbolic significance of the two types of water in this narrative – the water in Jacob's well and Jesus' living water. Both of them act as the respective metaphoric solutions to the personal, sociocultural, religious-spiritual, and political-moral crises that this narrative highlights.

13 For a "literary structure of John 4:1–42," identifying it as "'narrative,' 'drama,' and 'a poetic composition,'" cf. Thettayil 2007, 12–32.

14 We acknowledge the importance of worship in this text, especially as the word appears 10 times alone in vv.20–24 in the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, but we shall not dwell on it in this article. Thettayil has done an in-depth study of this notion in John, calling it "the new worship," cf. Thettayil 2007, 106–65.

15 Cf. Thettayil 2007, 30.

16 For a brief history of the Samaritans and a possible mistake in spelling "Sychar" instead of "Shechem," cf. Brown 1966, 36. Also for a brief history of "the opposition between Jews and Samaritans," within the context of the commentary on John 4:9, cf. Ellis 1985, 69.

17 Cf. Carson 1991, 214–5; Keener 2003, 584.

The passage of 4:1–42 is one of the pericopes in the Johannine Gospel where water¹⁸ features prominently. Consequently, the symbolism of water should play a significant role in interpreting and understanding this narrative. Here are the passages:

- John 2:1–8: This is the passage that narrates Jesus' first sign in the Fourth Gospel. The Lord handles the wine crisis (lack of wine) through the symbolic sign of changing water into wine.
- John 3:1–21 depicts Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus about being born again of water and the Spirit. This account addresses the deficiency of biological and earthly birth with spiritual rebirth from above.
- John 4:1–42 references two types of water. The living water satisfies the human deeper (spiritual) thirst for salvation.
- John 5:1–9 describes the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda. The Johannine Jesus personifies the living healing spring, which the bedridden man is unable to reach to immerse himself in when the pool is stirred. Therefore, Jesus saves the paralytic from further futile attempts to participate in the competitive race for the intermittently agitated pool, which he never wins.
- John 6:16–21 describes Jesus walking on the water, whereby the Lord calms the storm and rescues his disciples from drowning in the turbulent water.
- John 7:37–38 quotes Jesus' declaration: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." As the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Therefore, those experiencing thirst can find satisfaction in Jesus' symbolic gift of "living water."
- John 9:7 shows Jesus telling the man born blind to wash his eyes, which were smeared with mud, in the pool of Siloam. The Lord addresses the blindness crisis through an act of aqua therapy.
- John 13:5–10, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet with water to teach them a lesson about humble service in love. In this way, followers of Jesus can overcome the temptation of pride, which can lead to a leadership crisis and the unnecessary debate about who is the greatest among them (Luke 22:24–27).
- Finally, in John 19:34, the reference to water and its symbolism in John's Gospel becomes clear at the cross, where blood and water flow from Jesus' pierced side (19:34). Metaphorically and symbolically, Jesus reveals the "heart" (κοιλία) from which "rivers of living water" flow (cf. John 7:38).

Now, the two water symbolisms in our narrative (John 4:1–26) correlate with the crises our episode exposes during the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The contents of the crises can be divided into two: the

18 For an in-depth analysis of 'water' and its significance in this passage, cf. Ford 2021, 107–12.

tension between the Samaritans and the Jews (4:9) and the personal, moral and spiritual life of the Samaritan woman (4:16–18). There have been some tendencies to mute the moral aspect of the Samaritan woman's narrative.¹⁹ In as much as it is important to highlight the positive qualities of the Samaritan woman, especially her boldness to speak freely with Jesus, it is also necessary to acknowledge the negative aspect of her life, which defines and determines her need for salvation by Jesus. Her encounter with Jesus is not for a social communicative exchange; instead, it is for the revelation of salvation in and through Jesus Christ, which addresses her personal crisis and the crises in her community. And the good news is that Jesus responds to the exposed crisis situation with his gift of salvation by offering the symbolic gift of the living water. In that way, he represents the Father who so loves the world (3:16). And so, if the Samaritan woman's refusal to share the water from Jacob's well projects socio-cultural, historical and religious crises between the Samaritans and the Jews, then Jesus' offer of "the living water" indicates the reality of moral and spiritual aridity, which must be handled by the acceptance of this living water from him.

Consequently, it can be observed that John purposefully employs water, and the water setting in his Gospel, for practical, symbolic,²⁰ metaphorical and illustrative purposes. In other words, John uses water as imagery²¹ for spiritual realities, and water sceneries as natural settings for the orchestrations of Jesus' saving acts during his public ministry. We shall now explore how the two types of water in our passage drive the development of the entire narrative. Should the crisis be symbolised with the thirst for water, the desire for freedom from the guilt of moral failure, social-cultural and religious constraints, then the water from Jacob's well and Jesus' living water are metaphoric of Jesus' manifested salvation in the crisis-ridden environment, community and culture.

Conclusively, we observe that the two waters in our narrative represent and symbolise God's gifts for both the physical and spiritual salvation of the people of Samaria in their crisis-ridden culture. On the one hand, this contextual setting highlights the need for the response of faith to Jesus so that the believer can receive his "living water." On the other hand, it underscores the readiness to generously engage in a missionary outreach of the symbolic sharing of natural water with Jesus. This would concretely involve the spreading of the good news about Jesus in and outside Samaria (4:28–29). It can be observed

19 Cf. Holst 2013, 18.

20 Cf. Zimmermann 2006, 20–3.

21 For the purpose of imagery in John as a means "to open the Gospel to all people," cf. Zimmermann 2006, 41.

that this action of the Samaritan woman introduces the second dialogue in the narrative, which exposes Jesus' missionary instruction to his disciples (4:31–38). This implies the necessity of reconciliation with one's fellow human beings, whereby all hindrances – social, political, religious, moral, spiritual and cultural – would evaporate.

The lesson from this passage of John's Gospel is that Faith in Jesus and generosity with God's gifts, symbolised by the water from Jacob's well and Jesus' living water, serve the purpose of salvation in our crisis-ridden world. Over and above all, this analysis has exposed Jesus' presence at Jacob's well and with the Samaritans as highly symbolic. The Lord himself can be seen as the symbol of God. As such, we acknowledge the truth with C. K. Barrett as he states that Jesus is "the 'other piece' that requires and demonstrates the existence of its partner who is the Father, to know and to abide in him is to know and to abide in God."²² This observation is essential and necessary because the purpose of the entire narrative involves the theological presence of God among his children in the person of his Christ for their salvation.

4. Theological Analysis

According to John, the Samaritan woman mentions Jacob's well as a gift (4:12). Jesus makes a statement about the gift of "the living water,"²³ "the gift of God" (v.10), and "worshipping the Father" (v.21). Furthermore, he states that the Father seeks true worshippers (v.23). Finally, John defines God as "Spirit" (v.24). These are theologically significant expressions that point to the theme of salvation in the narrative. Thus, our text is theologically and soteriologically significant.

The fourth evangelist makes Jesus the leading character in his narrative. According to the structure of the narrative, John demonstrates that the Lord

²² Barrett 1982, 79.

²³ For the implication of this expression as "Jesus is making use of Jewish categories, where the supreme 'gift of God' is the Torah," cf. Carson 1991, 218. For further association of "the gift" with the Torah, though he says that "Jesus does not speak directly of Torah here," but adds that "Rabbis sometimes compared Torah to water and a good Torah teacher to a well," cf. Keener 2003, 602–3. Furthermore, Martin and Wright IV follow this line of thought. They speak about a "literal talk about drinking water" and the fact that "Jesus shifts to a spiritual level with his reference to 'living water', which refers spiritually to the water of eternal life," 2015, 83. For a much more comprehensive commentary, which also focuses exclusively on the "living water" to the neglect of the well water, cf. Beasley-Murray 1987, 60.

is the centre of unity for all the other components of the literary composition (4:1–6). It is Jesus who begins the journey from Judea and moves towards Galilee. When they arrive in Samaria, John portrays him as thirsty, weary and sitting alone at Jacob's well. He alone engages the Samaritan woman in a dialogue. In the end, it is also Jesus who reveals himself as the Messiah. He is the saviour whom the Samaritan woman, her people and indeed the entire people of God have been expecting. Thus, Jesus plays the dual role of representing the biologically and spiritually thirsty, as well as hungry, Jew. He is also the Messiah who gives the living water of salvation to God's children. Now, Jesus identifies with the Samaritan woman, thereby showing himself to be in solidarity with human beings in both their biological and spiritual crises.²⁴

Furthermore, given the Johannine references to the spirit in this episode, there begins an echo of the sounding wind of the new creation among the Samaritans, which calls to mind the second creation account, where God forms the human being and breathes into his nostrils, and the human person becomes a living being (Gen 2:7). This same process evolves in John's Gospel in a manner that indicates a renewal of life with human beings exemplified by the Samaritans. We note the development of the fourth Gospel up to 20:22, when Jesus breathed unto his disciples, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The sequence of the Johannine Gospel, especially chapter 1, reflects the actualisation of the new creation, i.e., the new beginning for the restoration of creation to its original glory.²⁵ Therefore, the event narrated in 4:1–26 marks the start of a new life, a transformation of the Samaritans into the image of Christ. In other words, they become one with Christ in their community of faith in him. Theologically speaking, faith in Jesus determines the transformation into the image of Christ, which marks the regeneration, the restoration and the attainment of eternal life through knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ.²⁶

24 For a reflection by Ambrose of Milan, where he states: "... He is wearied, but wearied with you, because he has sought you for so long," cf. Stewart and Thomas 2018, 125.

25 For a reference to the continuous presence and action of the spirit here (3:34; 4:23–24; 16:13; 20:22). Cf. Ford 2021, 27–8.

26 For the conclusion: "faith therefore is the equivalent of the life-giving vision, or knowledge, of God." On the same page, Dodd expands this statement thus: "Thus πίσις that form of knowledge, or vision, appropriate to those who find God in a historic Person of the past, a Person who nevertheless, through it, remains the object of saving knowledge, the truth, and the life," cf. Dodd 1958, 186. For yet another emphasis on the notion of "to believe" stated thus: "A fascinating aspect of John's presentation is the stress placed not on physical viewing and touching (which Thomas demanded), but on the need to 'believe' (πιστός: 20:27). The climax of this episode is Jesus' beatitude: 'Blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe' (20:29), leading beautifully into John's conclusion on the Gospel's purpose (20:30–31)," cf. Edwards 2014, 98.

Consequently, this passage can be viewed as a Christological narrative, indicating that Jesus concretely embodies salvation in crisis-ridden Samaria. He builds a faith community (4:41–42),²⁷ aligning with the purpose of John's Gospel that "you may believe" (20:30–31). According to this narrative, Jesus also defines true worship of God as a religious act performed "in spirit and truth" (4:23). Therefore, it can be argued that alongside God's gift of water at Jacob's well, the Samaritans receive the spiritual gift of the "living water" that Jesus offers. Both symbols represent God's salvific presence amid their crises. Implicitly, therefore, culture and grace are not mutually exclusive, but rather inclusive, as both serve human beings according to their biological and spiritual needs for abundant life (10:10). Clearly, our analysis of John 4 highlights its relevance in addressing the crisis facing the African continent. Africa, too, needs to encounter Jesus to experience the liberating power of the Lord's salvific visit and presence. Therefore, we shall now turn our focus to the crisis-ridden continent of Africa.

5. Modelling John 4:1–26 for an Intercultural Biblical Response for Salvation in Crisis-Ridden Africa

Like the Samaria of Jesus' time, Africa bleeds because of human, socio-historical and religious crises. In order to avoid the stereotypical blaming of the slave trade and colonialism as the unpardonable cause of the crises in the continent of Africa, we prefer to reflect on the problem from the creation story narrative, which involves the original blessing, especially of human beings who are made in God's image, and the corrupting consequence of the original sin (Gen 1–3).²⁸ Therefore, how can this continent regain its 'paradise lost'? In the light of biblical truth, if Africa also lost her innocence as a result of the fall, then Africa must manifest faith and hope in the salvific intervention of Jesus Christ, who transforms the people into the image of Christ.²⁹

According to Okure, the rejected Jesus and the Samaritan woman should be invited to visit Africa in order to liberate her from the shackles of prejudice and

27 For the statement: "the content of belief is in every nature, mission, and status of Christ ..." which underscores the fact that the Samaritans state that they believe because they have themselves heard and known that Jesus is truly the saviour, cf. Dodd 1958, 182–3.

28 For the observation that "Genesis 3 ... belongs to a larger unit in Gn. 2–6 that dramatises the 'fallout' of human desire in Gn. 3, eventuating in human sin and wickedness ...," cf. Collins 2022, 210.

29 Cf. Theissen 2005, 27.

rejection.³⁰ Given Okure's proposed fundamental background of Jesus' and the Samaritan woman's socio-cultural and even religious situation of discrimination and rejection, it would seem that Jesus' mission of salvation in Africa is accidental. This idea appears to support the notion that Africa is an afterthought in God's plan of salvation. It should not be the case that God's salvation in Christ reaches Africa because Jesus and the Samaritan woman become refugees on the continent. The author of the Acts of the Apostles presents the narrative course that the Gospel spread beyond Jerusalem because of the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution of the disciples of Jesus (Acts 8). However, we recall that Jesus tells his disciples that they shall be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Consequently, in as much as human and historical circumstances can facilitate the preaching of the Gospel in Africa, Jesus' gift of salvation to her is a part of the original divine plan. Just as Jesus intentionally and freely goes to Samaria, and the Samaritan woman also goes to fetch some water from the community well, so the Gospel of Jesus must be intentionally and freely preached in Africa. When the Holy Family takes refuge in Egypt (Africa) (cf. Matt 2:13–15), Matthew does not associate the flight with the mission of evangelisation, but rather it is for the fulfilment of Scripture, which implies that the history of salvation works according to God's design and plan. The implication is that Africa is well-positioned by God and fully recognised in his design and plan for creation, salvation and sanctification. It is, therefore, no accident that the continent of Africa blooms and blossoms with a greatly increasing number of believers in Christ. This confirms the truth about the good news of Scripture as recorded in Acts 10:34, which says, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

What, then, is it about culture, crisis and salvation in Africa? The main point of the contribution is Theissen's observation concerning the contribution of the Bible to the general culture of the world.³¹ And so, here are some of the biblical contributions to culture, which will shape our response: creation in the image and likeness of God, the Fall and its consequent loss of God's image and likeness,³² biblical formation, faith,³³ the spirit,³⁴ the truth,³⁵ the reality

30 Cf. Okure 2009, 409–10.

31 Cf. Theissen 2005, 27–56.

32 Cf. Theissen 2005, 27.

33 Cf. Dodd 1958, 185–6.

34 Cf. Dodd 1958, 226–7.

35 Cf. Dodd 1958, 177–8.

of transformation, worship, communal harmony, reconciliation, security, and mission. All these elements feature explicitly or implicitly in the narrative unfolding of John 4:1–42. Such a biblical drama should play on the stage of the African continent for the actualisation of salvation there.

Africa boils in the crisis of hunger, thirst and insecurity; she is even riddled with the fundamentalism of the ‘prosperity gospel’. In other words, the continent of Africa wallows in poverty. For instance, according to the United poverty index survey in November of 2022, “63% of persons living within Nigeria (133 million people) are multidimensionally poor.”³⁶ The number reached 80% since May 2023. The International Trade Administration informs that, “The Nigerian Economic Summit Group projects an unemployment rate of 37% in 2023.” It goes further to say that, “Recent years have been challenging for Nigerians regarding insecurity as the country combats several forms of crime and terror – across all its 36 states.”³⁷ Wabyanga poses the question: “What is African poverty?” He describes poverty as a phenomenon beyond “a local economic problem;” that “it is global and social, a very serious matter of international concern.”³⁸ Reflecting on the cause of poverty in Africa, Wabyanga stated that the major cause is the corruption of the political leaders on the continent. But why do African political leaders not demonstrate a strong willingness and engage in genuine, practical ways to address the menace of corruption? This question lies at the heart of the crisis in Africa, which longs for the salvific intervention of Christ.

To attempt an intercultural biblical response to the crisis of corruption-induced poverty in Africa using the narrative about Jesus, the Samaritan woman, and the Samaritans themselves might appear too theoretical to solve the problem. However, the reality is that the crisis in Africa has three major causes: spiritual, human and ideological. Since this article does not have any political intention, it focuses mainly on the lessons from the story of the Samaritan woman as analysed. Thus, since Africa has a lot of Christians, with many of her leaders also being Christians, we expect that the kind of conversion, which the Samaritan woman and the Samaritans experienced in dialogue with Jesus, can also happen in the cradle continent of human life. This is the reason that the message of the truth, as John likes to apply the term, must be undilutedly proclaimed in Africa as Jesus does to the Samaritan woman and

36 Cf. <https://nigeriastat.gov.ng>.

37 Cf. “Official Website of the International Trade Administration – Nigeria – Country Commercial Guide,” 2023–06–06.

38 Wabyanga 2022, 309.

subsequently sends his disciples on a mission to do likewise. And so, what could be the intercultural biblical response to this crisis?

Firstly, I reflect on the fact that the Samaritan woman goes to draw water from Jacob's well all alone and at an hour when the well is deserted.³⁹ She returns home physically safe and spiritually renewed (4:28). She has even been bold enough to engage Jesus (a strange Jew) without fear and shyness. This observation raises the curiosity about the safety of the water environment in Africa today? Could women, even in groups, safely go to the village streams, fetch their water, and return home safely, without negative incidents?

Secondly, there is a concern for religious freedom in Africa, which mirrors the debate about the true place of worship in Israel, whether it is on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem. Africa has been divided along religious lines. Firstly, it is between Christianity and the traditional religion. Then, it involves Christianity and Islam. Moreover, now there are also inter-denominational Christian divisions. All these divisions fuel hatred, rancour, terror, mutual distrust, etc. And so, how can the intercultural biblical response to the crisis be actualised and realised in Africa?

Africa is large and her peoples so heterogeneous. A mere geographical identification of it as a continent of the black race cannot do her justice in solving her crisis. However, since Jesus' salvation in crisis involves the universal element of natural and spiritual water, we could make at least some general propositions. Thus, how could there be abundant natural water in Africa? How can we make Jesus' living water flow freely so that Africans can have free access to it? Does Africa not need the Rev 21–22 situations where the rivers, which harbour deadly beasts, disappear and give way to the "river of the water of life" (Rev 21:1c, 6; 22:1–2a)? When will the seas be safe for African youths and not their untimely graves? When will natural water be abundantly provided for Africans to fetch from and at their chosen time of day? And when will the living water of Jesus' salvation flow in Africa without being blocked by the Christianity-Islam division, the Christian-traditional religion dichotomy, and the Christian interdenominational mutual aspersion, suspicion and condemnation? Why should Africans continue to fan the embers of an imaginary

39 According to Raymond Brown, "the woman's choice of time for coming to the well is unusual; such a chore was done in the morning and evening" (Brown 1966, 169). For a much more detailed implication of the point that the Samaritan woman goes to fetch water at an odd time, the "sixth hour," and that she actually breaks a record: she "transgresses cultural and social expectations, probably has something to hide, goes by herself, not accompanied by other women of the village," cf. Martin and Wright 2015, 83.

enmity that hinders love, “living the faith,”⁴⁰ blocks generosity, destroys friendship, hampers freedom and endangers security?

Another point concerns formation. The unfolding and development of John 4:1–26 follow a progressive formative structure. Jesus leads the Samaritan woman along the path of self-discovery. This involves her spiritual awakening, religious insight, moral self-awareness, social responsibility and missionary consciousness. In other words, Jesus forms the Samaritan woman and her kinsfolk toward transformation into the image of Christ, who not only offers living water, but also teaches intercultural generosity for the mutual sharing of natural water.

The Lord Jesus also teaches the Samaritan woman about the meaning of true worship, which depends on the definition of God as Spirit (4:23). Africa needs to re-examine her understanding and vision of God. This should be the aim of African Christian formation for transformation. The image of God presented by the ‘prosperity Gospel’⁴¹ in modern-day Africa will neither lead to true knowledge of God nor his worship in spirit and truth because the ‘prosperity Gospel’ tends to reduce genuine worship to a pursuit of material wealth.

Conclusively, we must begin to tell the truth in and about Africa. We need to be sincere in dealing with Africa. There is a real need to listen and hear deeply what the heart, the mind and the spirit of the African person long to say. It is not enough to hastily drop some extra coins and rush to establish poverty alleviation programs. Rather, there is a deep groaning in the African soul (cf. Rom 8:22–23), a groaning akin to creation as subjected to futility not of its own accord (cf. Rom 8:19–21). Both the African elite and their enablers all over the world have not taken the pain to hear deep into the African soul. Jesus truly hears the Samaritan woman out. Such listening is what the child, youth, adult, woman, and elder seek, even as they practically move about with their empty buckets and worn-out ropes, looking for the well from which to draw some water! Africa needs all the wells of natural water as well as the listening ears of Jesus, who offers the superabundant “living water” that wells up to “eternal life.” Salvation must be actualised in crisis-ridden Africa.

40 This is a slogan of the “Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students” (NFCS). Any member of this association who wishes to address the body begins by saying: “NFCS!” The group members reply: “Living the faith!” The former says: “Living the Faith!” And the group responds: “NFCS!”

41 “The core message of this ‘gospel’ is that wealth is a blessing from God. Those who possess material wealth are those who have been blessed by God. The ideology is rooted in an individualistic concept of salvation, a sign of the ideology’s origins in the individual experience of television watching ...,” cf. Collins 2017, 287–8.

Conclusion

Salvation is God's gift to human beings in a crisis-ridden world. The two waters in the episode involving the Samaritans, the water from Jacob's well and Jesus' living water, symbolically demonstrate the actuality of salvation. Just as both waters are indispensable to two important aspects of human life, biological and spiritual, so also both Samaritans and Jews need these waters. This salvific solution applies extensively to women and men, youths and children in Africa. Crisis in the world is not exclusive to a particular gender, group, or nationality. The challenge is to discover how the Christological solution to it can be actualised in all the cultures of today's world.

Consequently, as much as there are natural and spiritual differences between the two waters, they are both symbolic and of mutual value for human beings since they are "gifts of God" with salvific effects. On the one hand, refusing to share biological water with a thirsty person can be described as a lack of reciprocity towards God's generosity, which provides natural water. We can understand the danger of the water crisis to human life and existence!⁴² The experiences of Somalia and South Sudan are both fresh in our minds.⁴³ Hence, any factor that would prevent the sharing of water with a thirsty person can be considered murderous. However, the question is whether such a hindrance should ever exist or continue to exist (cf. John 4:9).

On the other hand, the rejection of the living water from Jesus poses an even greater danger, as it can destroy the human soul and the spiritual life. It can also demonstrate the lack of faith necessary for salvation – for gaining eternal life (cf. John 4:14; 20:31). God saves the biologically thirsty people of Samaria by supplying them with natural water in Jacob's well. According to Jesus, God also saves them spiritually through "the living water," which he offers them through

42 Cf. Lightfoot 1972, 121, for a description of the necessity and need of water. A lack of water "is the prelude to the most dreadful of deaths." He also talks about the imagery of thirst as representative of "man's desire for God."

43 "In 2011, some 250,000 people in Somalia – half of whom were children – died in a famine that followed three consecutive seasons without adequate rainfall," cf. <https://www.rescue.org>. As at 10th Feb 2022, the "News and Press Release" by "Save the Children" presented the following statistics thus: "Save the Children assessment of over 12,000 people from 15 of 18 regions across Somalia reveals: 70% of households do not have enough food to eat. Nearly 700,000 camels, goats, sheep and cattle died from drought-related causes over two months," cf. <https://www.savethechildren.net>. Also, "Fifty-nine per cent of the population in South Sudan lacks access to safe water. To survive, families may be forced to drink dirty water, putting them at risk of waterborne diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea, which remain the leading causes of death among children in South Sudan," cf. <https://www.unicef.org>.

the Messiah whom he has sent. The proper response to these divine gifts is generosity and faith.

Now, just as human negative constraints can inhibit the generous sharing of natural water (cf. John 4:7), so too, lack of faith can hinder the flow of living water for spiritual salvation. Consequently, the fact that John chooses the environment of Jacob's well for the revelation of the living water demonstrates the complementary significance of the two types of water for integral human natural and spiritual salvation. Therefore, the experience of salvation in crisis-ridden Africa requires faith and generosity. However, what does this practically imply?

Although the text of our analysis presupposes socio-political and religious-historical backgrounds, the goal of this paper is not to present a socio-political critique, for the practical reason of applying the result of our analysis to the refractory perennial socio-political and religious-historical hindrances and obstructions to the free flow of both natural biological and Jesus' living water. We want to capture these problems with two observations elaborated by two previously cited authors. These areas of socio-political and historical-religious misadventures in Africa urgently need a liberating encounter with Jesus for the actualisation of salvation on the continent. The two terminologies that represent the crisis situations are "the barriers of prejudice," according to Okure⁴⁴ and "the stench of corruption," by Robert Kuloba Wabyanga.⁴⁵

Fourteen years after Okure presented her analysis of John 4:4–42 and documented her call to action to address the problem of prejudice,⁴⁶ it is disheartening to observe that the situation has not changed much. Why are poverty conditions worsening in Africa and for Africans? Wabyanga presents the major cause in his 2022 article, when he states thus:

44 Okure 2009, 409.

45 Wabyanga 2022, 315.

46 "Jesus and the Samaritan woman would encounter and readily identify with this prejudice. Africa is richly blessed by God in human, land, animal, mineral, and other natural resources. Africans helped build and continue to build the economy of the West, in the past through slave labour, and today through the 'brain drain' of intellectuals and professionals in all fields, a practice akin to what Assyria did to Samaria and other conquered peoples in ancient times. Africa's resources have been looted and exploited by colonial masters and would-be messiahs, in the past as well as in the present. For centuries Western countries have carted out the wealth of Africa, and now the Chinese and the Indians are following suit under the guise of helping Africa develop" (Okure 2009, 411).

The stench of corruption is not only found among politicians, it is much more pronounced in the judiciary where the courts of law and the police fail to deliver justice to the poor. Right from the local courts to the high courts, officials who preside over cases tend to be blindfolded by heavy bribes in form of money and other material gains. The poor people are not only victims of misjudgement but have incurred other losses of property often seized by the rich. Without any prejudice to any court rulings, in Uganda, there are reports that victims of land grabbing (mainly widows and orphans) have lost cases because they cannot afford bribes to local council courts, police, and legal courts. Various Transparency International corruption reports reveal that police forces in the subcontinent are notoriously corrupt with Nigeria, DR Congo, Kenya and Uganda in the lead. The impact of corruption on development and poverty alleviation is adverse and has received fair scholarly analyses.⁴⁷

A lot has been said and written regarding corruption in Africa. One wonders whether there is something ontological about Africa and corruption that all the cries against it as a significant cause of underdevelopment and the pleas to desist from it have yielded little or no positive results in most parts of the black continent. The refractory conundrum of corruption in Africa has reached the level that we should call for a radical attempt to kill and bury it once and for all. One such solution is to declare corruption a moral terrorism that must face the maximum resistant force as that employed against terrorism and terrorists. Those who aid and abet corruption in the name of whatever covert and overt 'interests' should also be made to realise that they are aiding and abetting a form of terrorism, which is murdering millions of African youths and children both at home and abroad. I, therefore, agree with Okure when she states:

The consistent New Testament message embodied in this narrative, which we seem to have lost sight of over the centuries, is that God does the seeking and saving of humans, not the reverse. We can trace this theme back to the Fall and the *protoevangelium* of Genesis (3:15), where God indicates that the trajectory of salvation will run through the seed of the woman. What human beings must do is allow themselves to be sought and found by God and open themselves to God's free and unconditional gift of salvation and redemption.⁴⁸

47 Wabyanga 2022, 315.

48 Okure 2009, 410.

Finally, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman and the people of Samaria presents a model of openness and receptivity to God's constant offer of the gift of both biological and spiritual salvation as symbolised by the gifts of Jacob's well water and Jesus' living water. In the crisis, which tends to envelop the continent of Africa and Africans, Jesus appears with his gift of salvation in Africa's arid deserts and green lands. Should Africa and Africans continue to throw stones of bitterness and complaints against slavery and colonialism, or positively embrace the offer of new life from Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world?

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Successful Dialogue in Times of Crises and Conflicts?! Hermeneutical and Methodological Reflection of Intercultural Exegesis in the Light of John 4

Madeline Stratmann

Introduction: The Era of “Polycrisis” and Need for Productive Dialogues

We are all living in times of growing crises and conflicts. This has been evident not only in the context of the COVID pandemic but has also served to highlight the inevitability of global crises. However, the environmental crisis, the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as social crises related, for example, to the threats of inflation as well as racist and anti-Semitic hostility, are causing us to recognise on a daily basis that we are no longer dealing with a single crisis at once, but rather with many multiple ones day by day. This phenomenon has been referred to by certain researchers as the ‘age of polycrisis’, a term denoting the interconnected nature of these crises, rendering them inextricably linked and incapable of examination in isolation.¹

It becomes evident here that a significant number of these conflicts are shaped by a multitude of factors, including: misunderstandings, the absence of productive dialogue, asymmetrical hierarchies, and the abuse of power and positions. It must be acknowledged that this is a rather generalised approach to that issue which cannot address the numerous and complex political and cultural interconnections in full depth. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that these issues are also relevant and significant within the field of biblical studies. In the present era of rising conflicts and unsuccessful and missing dialogue, biblical scholars too are confronted with the challenge of avoiding the pitfalls of unequal communication and power imbalances. Therefore, they must consider how to foster productive dialogue and collaboration. The advent of globalisation has made it easier than ever to interact with individuals from

¹ Cf. Lähde 2023: <https://aeon.co/essays/the-case-for-polycrisis-as-a-keyword-of-our-interconnected-times> [access: 5.8.2024].

diverse cultural backgrounds, underscoring the urgency of these issues even further.

For an extended period, a euro-centric approach to biblical interpretation and the method of historical-critical exegesis were dominant.² However, as the result of cultural exchange, an increasing number of diverse methods and interpretations of the Bible have emerged in biblical studies,³ challenging the claim to universality of diachronic methods such as the historical-critical exegesis and, therefore, raising the potential for conflicts and crises within the field of biblical studies.

To facilitate and encourage successful intercultural communication and cooperation, which is shaped by symmetrical structures and mutual respect, it is necessary, to perceive biblical hermeneutics and its intercultural influences as valuable and enriching, and to be open to alternative methods of biblical interpretation. This necessitates a critical reflection on one's own culturally influenced hermeneutics and approach to biblical texts, as well as the limitations and pitfalls inherent to that method.

1. Intercultural Hermeneutical Reflections: Main Observations

As part of my Master's thesis, *John 4:1–42 in intercultural dialogue: A critical reflection on methods of biblical exegesis*, I examined the hermeneutics by studying the exegeses of selected works by non-Western exegetes from Asia, Latin America and Africa. I highlighted key aspects that characterise their work and demonstrated how their approach and methods can benefit and enrich Western biblical studies. In the spirit of intercultural exchange, the main points of my findings will be briefly presented here. Thereby, it is important to emphasise that these findings can only serve as examples for individual cultures of non-Western countries and are in no way to be understood as a general presentation of *the one*, non-Western perspective. Rather, the aim is to challenge the prevailing focus on historical-critical approaches and to expand the horizons towards synchronic interpretations.

Many works emerging from Asian, African, and Latin American contexts adopt a markedly synchronic and strongly contextual hermeneutic. The lived realities of the interpreters exert a decisive influence on their exegetical practices, such that the world of the text is brought into dialogical engagement

² Cf. Soares-Prabhu 1991, 70–80.

³ Cf. Soares-Prabhu 1991, 70–80.

with the life-worlds of the people. In this way, the text's meaning is continually re-articulated in relation to concrete socio-cultural experiences, underscoring its contemporary relevance and significance within each respective context. This becomes clear, for example, in a liberation-theological orientation of Latin American exegeses, which aim to emancipate minorities and oppressed sections of society.⁴ The desire for emancipation is not only related to the Latin American region, but is a general characteristic of intercultural hermeneutics where the biblical text is used to actively criticise society by interpreting the text as a contrary option for action in order to draw attention to grievances within society and demand a rethink.

The exegete Schroder for example, has initiated exegetical workshops for HIV-infected women in Brazil, in which the women interpret and discuss biblical passages addressing the marginalisation of women, such as John 4:1–42. These workshops provide a framework for the women to contextualise the passages within their own experiences of marginalisation in the context of 'popular readings'. This approach enables the women to apply a liberation theological perspective to their understanding of the text.⁵ While in secular societies, such as Germany, religion and belief systems are often perceived as something inhibiting and restrictive, the opposite is often the case for non-Western cultures. When the voice of the oppressed is heard, and once again becomes the core of theology for the lives of the addressee, the biblical text can unfold its transformative and liberating potential.

The exegesis examined work in a very interdisciplinary way. So as to perceive the text as a whole, literary or linguistic methods were used frequently (e.g. methods of re- and storytelling), as well as references to traditional ways of interpreting (e.g. the focus on culturally significant symbolism, such as water⁶), that can also be cross-religious⁷ (e.g. Hindu ideas of biblical symbols). The focus on the characters in the biblical stories is also clearly recognisable in order to create points of identification still relevant today. With these means, the historical gap between the world of the text and the world of the reader can be overcome. Through the various methods of interpretation, the text is presented multi-dimensionally and new perspectives are opened up, creating space for contextual criticism.

4 Works, I have studied here were, for example: Míguez 2006, 120–129 or George 2001, 367–77.

5 Cf. Schroder 2015, 568–82.

6 Cf. Folarin, Oladosu and Baba 2012, 15–36.

7 Cf. Mathew 2004, 100–26.

In the hermeneutics of intercultural exegesis, postcolonial and feminist readings of the Bible also play a decisive role in this context.⁸ They reflect the motivation of liberating contextual exegesis by critically reflecting on biblical passages that have been interpreted in a patriarchal and pro-colonialistic way, thus exposing the dominant exegetical approaches and hierarchies of the Western world, and actively questioning their claim to universality.

As a result of this literature review, it can be stated that, from an intercultural perspective, the method of historical-critical interpretation that has proven itself in Western cultures, cannot be assumed to be universally valid. Particularly against the background of the colonial history of non-Western countries, such restrictive thinking is problematic, since the claim to the universal validity of Western understanding of biblical exegesis and its hermeneutics is transferred to non-Western countries without taking into account the hermeneutics and understanding prerequisites of the cultures themselves. Although alternative methods to the historical-critical method have increasingly emerged since the end of the last century,⁹ such methodological pluralism can become a challenge, especially in an intercultural discursive context. It is therefore necessary to develop strategies in order to react to this methodological diversity and to develop possible courses of action.

2. Synchronic Methods in Progress: Exemplary Consideration of Narrative Exegesis on John 4

To gain a more nuanced understanding of a narrative and biographical orientation of this exegetical approach, some of the key topics of the observed works on John 4 will be presented as examples that should underline their focus. From a narrative perspective, the story of John 4 encompasses a multitude of focal points that extend beyond its mere historical context. First, there is a strong focus on biblical figures who play a major role. In the case of John 4, the Samaritan woman and Jesus are essential, as well as their interaction and how their dialogue develops and changes both characters, and ultimately leads to salvation of the woman. The cause of this is seen in Jesus, who actively crosses the borders that are culturally constructed in this story by speaking to the woman. It was not appropriate for a man to speak alone with a woman who also seemed to be on the edge of society, as she was completely alone at the fountain. Jesus, however, ignores these obstacles by talking to the woman.

8 Cf. Nelavala 2007, 1–25.

9 Cf. Sugirtharajah 2012, 52–3.

The woman, on the other hand, also actively crosses these borders by becoming a spokesperson for her community due to her encounter with Jesus as the Messiah, thus overcoming her marginalised situation and social conventions. Both figures serve as a role model in this manner, questioning and even overcoming seemingly fixed power relations.¹⁰ From this narrative point of view, the story acquires a particularly transformative power that not only questions existing structures within the reader's world in a socially critical way, but even actively seeks to overcome them.

This also leads to the fact that the observed works adhere to a strong socio-critical perspective. Consequently, the themes of salvation and liberation emerge as the most prominent and significant, situated within the context of their lived experiences. Schroder for example, who contextualised the text within the narratives of HIV-infected women in South America, striving to help them overcome their stigmatisation,¹¹ or in the case of women belonging to the lower caste system in India, as elucidated in Nelavala's feminist exegesis.¹² In general, the text exhibits a strong transformative orientation, which becomes discernible only through an analysis of the narrative points in the story and leads to a strong interconnectivity between the world of the text and the world of the reader.

Additionally, culturally significant symbolism is examined, such as the water that the woman draws from the well. In the West African Yoruba culture, water is imbued with a distinctive, transformative power that reinforces the transformative effect of the pericope.¹³ By integrating these culturally significant elements into the text, exegetes from these cultures bridge the gap between the text and the reader, fostering an existential interpretation that resonates with the audience, instilling hope while also prompting reflection and introspection.

3. Methodological Reflections on Synchronous and Diachronous Methods of Biblical Interpretation

It is crucial to clarify that this work is not intended to evaluate one method of biblical exegesis as superior or inferior. Instead, the objective is to cultivate a critical perspective that evaluates one's own approach and its underlying

¹⁰ Cf. Lim 2010, 35–51.

¹¹ Schroder 2015, 568–82.

¹² Nelavala 2007, 1–25.

¹³ Cf. Folarin, Oladosu and Baba 2012, 15–36.

hermeneutic, identifying both its strengths and limitations. This allows for a willingness to consider alternative forms of biblical interpretation as a valuable contribution to the discourse, fostering meaningful and intercultural productive dialogue.

Nor can we, or should we, dispense with the importance of historical-critical exegesis, on the one hand, because the hermeneutics of the Enlightenment is so strongly embedded in Western cultures, and analytical and factual thinking characterises the Western world and its working method; but above all, because a biblical text must always be read in the context of its origin. This is the only way to prevent arbitrary and naïve interpretations of the Bible that tear the text out of its context, and lead to inappropriate conclusions. At its worst, such a disregard for the historical context leads to dangerous fundamentalist interpretations that attempt to appropriate the text for their purposes.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the historical-critical method reveals some weaknesses that become particularly problematic when working in an intercultural and multicultural context: How do we deal with the methodological plurality of other cultures working synchronously and contextually? Especially in cultures in which Enlightenment thinking was not established, the historical-critical method cannot be simply transferred and taken for granted as universally valid. Particularly from a postcolonial perspective, the mere imposition of the historical-critical method as the only scientifically recognised method from the West would be more than fatal, since it would reproduce hierarchies of paternalism and power and make a symmetrical dialogue impossible.¹⁵

A focus on narrative methods, as presented in the example of John 4, can be seen as a methodological attempt to open up towards alternative interpretations to historical-critical exegesis, which is also becoming increasingly popular in the West.¹⁶ Some of the advantages of this method became clear: it allows for a much more text-focused interpretation that can better respond to the contextual approaches of intercultural exegesis, also because it incorporates the perspectives of its interpreters into the exegesis. This emphasises the subjectivity of exegesis, which can allow for an exchange of different perspectives in dialogue. Synchronic interpretations should therefore be given just as much weight within the exegetical discourse as diachronic methods. Theologians such as Michael Theobald even go a step further in their argumentation, arguing that the path to the prehistory of a text can only be secured methodically

14 Cf. Ballhorn 2007, 19.

15 Cf. Mathew 2004, 101–2.

16 Cf. Vette 2007, 5.

if its present form has first been sufficiently analysed under its two aspects of form and content.¹⁷

But can the inclusion of synchronic methods alone be the solution to establishing an intercultural dialogue that is symmetrical and respectful? This question cannot be answered in the affirmative. Nevertheless, the introduction of alternative methods to historical-critical exegesis serves to broaden the horizons of established approaches. It promotes the development of a more open attitude towards other, alternative forms of methods, so that their advantages can be recognised and included within the scholarly discourse.

However, synchronic methods also have their weaknesses that can lead to difficulties. In particular, the lack of a historical contextualisation of the text must not be ignored. In any case, there is a need for guidelines that provide a basis for dialogue in the first place. Neither diachronic nor synchronic methods can therefore be judged as *superior* or *inferior* in principle, since all exegetical methods have their strengths and weaknesses that should be expressed in the preceding reflection on methods, which is always subject to the limits of its own hermeneutics. From an intercultural perspective, however, the synchronic methods certainly offer great points of connection and contact for an enriching exchange, but the limitations and problems must always be considered and included.

4. Approaches to Fostering a Successful Intercultural Dialogue in the Context of Scientific Discourse

Only when exegetes are aware of the respective limits of their own interpretations and hermeneutics, does an intercultural dialogue become possible without devaluing other perspectives. Rather than categorising and assessing methodologies as scientifically *superior* or *inferior*, it would be more beneficial to adopt a curious and open-minded approach to the interpretations of our own and other cultural perspectives, and ask ourselves: *What advantages does the method used offer?*, and also *What potential issues arise from this approach and require further scrutiny?* While the historicity of the text and its context of origin are undoubtedly significant, it is also possible to demonstrate how theology can be made relevant in the present era. Nevertheless, such an exchange can only succeed if there is a corresponding openness to alternative approaches. In this regard, it is essential to emphasise the nature of the dialogue, which should be based on mutual respect and appreciation.

17 Cf. Theobald 1978, 161–86.

In addition to this appreciative attitude, which is a fundamental prerequisite for a successful exchange, there are intriguing approaches by various theologians who have also identified the aforementioned dilemma and have proposed potential solutions or methodologies for interpreting the biblical texts. They advocate a synthesis of synchronic and diachronic textual considerations. The insights and explanations of theologians *Michael Theobald* and *Sandra M. Schneiders* for instance, are worthy of mention.

In his essay, Theobald acknowledges the growing interest in narrative and linguistic approaches to biblical texts. He therefore sees the task of his study as confronting the “*established succession*”¹⁸ of the historical-critical canon of methods with this interest. In this context, he advocates for a combination and mutual supplementation of synchronic and diachronic methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the text and its implications, ensuring that both the text itself and the historical context of its composition are duly considered in the analysis. This means, however, that diachrony should not be replaced by synchrony: “The *classical* diachronic methods ... are by no means abandoned in favor of *purely synchronic, canonical* methods, i.e. methods oriented only to the final text, but are hermeneutically reflected upon, balanced with new synchronic approaches and can thus be used for the more precise analysis of transmission processes.”¹⁹

Schneiders has also acknowledged the significant disparity between biblical scholarship and the practical applicability of theological concepts, which can be attributed, among other factors, to the inadequate consideration of hermeneutics by those engaged in biblical interpretation. Using three models, namely the *exegetical model* with its dominant historical-critical interpretation and the *hermeneutical model*, she endeavours to devise a methodology through which the findings of scientific biblical interpretation can be rendered more pertinent to the modern era. Furthermore, she acknowledges the limitations of historical-critical exegesis, noting that exegetes tend to refrain from drawing conclusions about contemporary Church practices based on the teachings of the biblical author. The outcomes of biblical research possess not only historical significance but also a paramount relevance to current faith practices, which should be effectively applied in a practical manner. As a solution, she proposes the incorporation of hermeneutics into exegesis, thereby establishing a more tangible connection between interpretation and the lifeworld.

18 Translated from German from Theobald 1978, 161.

19 Translated from German from Eisele, Schaefer and Weidemann 2013, 12.

While this may prove challenging for exegetes, it is nevertheless a worthwhile endeavour.²⁰

The Pontifical Biblical Commission also recognises the limitations of the individual methods and points out the possibility of combining them:

With respect to the inclusion in the [historical-critical] method of a synchronic analysis of texts, we must recognize that we are dealing here with a legitimate operation [...]. But diachronic study remains indispensable for making known the historical dynamism which animates sacred Scripture and for shedding light upon its rich complexity [...]. We must take care not to replace the historicizing tendency, for which the older historical-critical exegesis is open to criticism, with the opposite excess, that of neglecting history in favor of an exegesis which would be exclusively synchronic.

To sum up, the goal of the historical-critical method is to determine, particularly in a diachronic manner, the meaning expressed by the biblical authors and editors. Along with other methods and approaches, the historical-critical method opens up to the modern reader a path to the meaning of the biblical text such as we have it today.²¹

The document also emphasises the danger of an overly restrictive methodological view and pleads for a combination of synchronic and diachronic approaches in order to obtain as comprehensive a picture of the biblical text as possible. The strong methodological pluralism that has increasingly emerged in both Western and non-Western cultures since the 1970s should therefore be seen as an enriching potential.

These exemplary approaches take up the methodological problems of the work and seek appropriate solutions. They are aware of the deficits of individual methods and therefore attempt to relate the unconnected methodological approaches to one another, and thus make fruitful for exegesis the strengths of different approaches. Such studies should be continued and expanded in the future, also with regard to their yield for the intercultural context.

20 Cf. Schneiders 1981, 23–39.

21 Pontifical Biblical Commission 1994, Part I.

Conclusion

At the end of this article, I would like to present four theses that summarise and conclude the essence of this article. These arise from the results of the previous observations and elaborations.

1. Productive dialogue and mutual valuation as one of the most important aspects for opposing conflicts and crises.

Our time is characterised by a heightened prevalence of crises. The age of *polycrisis* has become a defining feature for our everyday lives and way of thought; it shapes our interactions with one another. Globalisation has also facilitated unprecedented levels of engagement with the experiences, challenges and crises of other cultures. In this context, it is imperative to cultivate a culture of dialogue characterised by constructive engagement and respect. This also entails challenging and dismantling positions of power.

2. This is also, or especially, valid for biblical exegesis and intercultural communication.

The field of biblical studies has historically been dominated by a Eurocentric perspective, with historical-critical exegesis serving as the dominant analytical approach to interpreting biblical texts. However, in the context of increasing globalisation and the resulting inter- and multicultural academic encounters, this orientation is reaching its limits. A diachronic interpretation of the text is therefore not a universally applicable approach, particularly in the context of diverse cultural and intellectual traditions.

3. Critically reflecting on one's own position and chosen methods, including their strengths as well as weaknesses, is the foundation for an appropriate work with biblical texts as well as intercultural cooperation.

Increasing multiculturalism in the field of biblical exegesis has also prompted a shift in perspective towards alternative forms of textual interpretation. This includes the observed methods of narrative exegesis, which adopt a literary perspective in their analysis of the text. In this regard, it is important to recognise that each methodology has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. It is essential to critically reflect on these aspects and to assess them in the context of the specific hermeneutics being employed. This enables one to remain open to the diversity of methodologies and to engage in constructive dialogue.

4. *Objectivity in biblical exegesis is not possible as there is always more than one possible, and even necessary, finding.*

A critical examination of one's own *work* and the methods employed in the context of the specific hermeneutical framework will inevitably lead to the realisation that unquestionable objectivity in biblical exegesis is an illusion, insofar as there is always more than one *true* interpretation of the text. This understanding paves the way for the exploration of alternative forms of biblical interpretation and the establishment of a productive dialogue.

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“Sir, I have no man”: A Communicative Reading of John 5:1–15 and the Ghanaian Christian Community

Amelia Dodoo

1. Introduction

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14a). This biblical passage embodies a core principle of Intercultural Hermeneutics:¹ namely, making the Word of God relevant and applicable to contemporary audiences.²

This paper is guided by Intercultural Hermeneutics in Communicative Perspective as proposed by Ossom-Batsa. With the goal of restoring “the word of God to its primary position, without forgetting its incarnation,”³ it recognises the importance of both the cultural context of the Biblical text and that of the implied reader in the interpretive process, offering a three-fold approach to interpretation: adherence to the Biblical text, call to action in the biblical text and in the context of the reader.

This study is structured into three sections: exegetical analysis of John 5:1–15; analysis of the relationship of the Ghanaian Christian community with people with disabilities; and a dialogue between John 5:1–15 and the Ghanaian Christian community.⁴

Narrative criticism as conceptualised by Resseguie is employed in the exegesis of John 5:1–15. For Resseguie, “no longer is the text the sole concern of investigation; the effects of the text upon the reader and how it transforms the reader’s point of view is also important.”⁵ The second section examines the Ghanaian Christian Community. In a context where 71.3% of its population identify as Christians, it is crucial to investigate whether our religious option impacts relationships with persons with disabilities. The final section of this paper engages in a dialogue between the call to action proposed by

1 Cf. Xie 2014, 3–7.

2 Cf. Ossom-Batsa 2014, 117.

3 Ossom-Batsa 2014, 128.

4 Gatti 2017, 46–67.

5 Resseguie 2005, 32–40.

the biblical text and the Ghanaian Christian community to foster a process of transformation.

2. Exegetical Analysis of John 5:1–15

The healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5:1–15 is the second healing narrative in the Fourth Gospel (the first is found in 4:46–50). With this healing, the author explores how Jesus' healing power impacts not only the revelation of Jesus' true identity, but also the transformation of the faith community.

2.1 Delimitation

The Fourth Gospel often employs a change in location to mark the beginning of a new pericope (e.g. 5:14; 6:1; 7:1; 13:7; 21:1);⁶ therefore, the introduction of Μετὰ ταῦτα in v.1 indicates the beginning of the pericope. Scholars, however, hold varying opinions on the endpoint of the pericope. While Schnackenburg and Brown view v.15 as the concluding verse, Brodie extends the pericope to include v.18,⁷ and Godet identifies v.16 as the end of the narrative.⁸ Given that the ἄνθρωπος, the central subject in the narrative, disappears after v.15, this paper posits that v.15 marks the endpoint of the pericope.

2.2 Structure

The proposed structure of John 5:1–15 is guided by the use of repetition as a rhetorical device (vv.5, 9b) and by the interaction between characters. The structure is outlined as follows:

1. Setting (vv.1–3)
2. Dialogue between the man and Jesus (vv.5–9a)
3. Dialogue between the man and others (vv.9b–15)
 - a. The man and the Jews (vv.9b–13)
 - b. The man and Jesus (v.14)
 - c. The man and the Jews (v.15)

6 Cf. Martin 2022, 246–64; Schnackenburg 1987, 92–9; Brown 1996, 212.

7 Cf. Brodie 1993, 234.

8 Cf. Godet 1879, 146.

2.3 Setting (vv.1–3)

The narrative introduces a familiar motif – the presence of Jesus in Jerusalem for a Jewish feast (e.g. 6:4; 7:2; 13:1).⁹ Scholars continue to debate the specific feast Jesus attended here, usually relying on the historical-critical method for identification. The plot, however, reveals that the identification of the feast has no direct impact on the healing narrative, but is used by the narrator as a literary medium to place Jesus in Jerusalem to reveal a Christological truth.¹⁰

Water plays important roles in the Gospel of John. It, therefore, comes as no surprise to see a multitude of persons with disabilities present at the pool, together with Jesus, the source of living waters (cf. 4:10). Having encountered a similar scene in chapter 4, the reader is poised with expectation to witness the contrast between the power of the pool and that of Jesus.

2.4 Dialogue between the Man and Jesus (vv.5–9a)

A rhetorical device, ἦν δέ, is used by the narrator to indicate a change in scene (e.g. 1:44; 3:1; 4:6; 6:4; 7:2). One man emerges from the background of the multitude of the people with varying disabilities and becomes the focus of the narrative. His name is not mentioned, but he is described as a τις ἄνθρωπος (“a certain man”), who has been in his condition (ἐν τῇ ἀσθενείᾳ αὐτοῦ – v.5) for thirty-eight years. The narrator emphasises the length of his suffering to underscore the severity of his condition.¹¹

Jesus is introduced onto the scene as an active participant initiating a dialogue with the man to *reveal* his true status and *transform* his life.¹² The initial question, θέλεις ὑγιῆς γενέσθαι (“do you want to be healed?”), is a signal to propel the man to depict his situation.¹³

The man's description of his condition conveys an intense sense of despair, akin to a state of hopelessness. Brodie interprets the man's response to Jesus as a complaint and suggests that he is so consumed by his problems that he no longer understands what he wants, describing him as confused, and blaming others for his inability to be healed.¹⁴ In contrast, Hahn and van Eck argue that the man lacks the faith to respond to Jesus,¹⁵ while Haenchen notes that the

9 Cf. Brodie 1993, 235.

10 Cf. Haenchen 1984, 243.

11 Cf. Brodie 1993, 236.

12 Cf. Brodie 1993, 236.

13 Cf. Haenchen 1984, 245; Hahn – van Eck 2021, 1.

14 Cf. Brodie 1993, 236.

15 Cf. Hahn – van Eck 2021, 1.

man does not ask for healing because he does not recognise Jesus or see the healing invitation in Jesus' question, a failure influenced by his sense of hopelessness.¹⁶ This study, however, considers these positions biased: How could the man have perceived that Jesus was different from the others and was offering him an opportunity to be healed when he was presently living in an environment where no one ever offers help to him? His response clearly reveals his desire to be healed, as he mentions his own efforts to achieve it. For this reason, the reader is drawn into the man's world, experiencing his plight.

Jesus reveals his Messianic identity through the healing, but the man fails to grasp this revelation, as evidenced by his response to the Jews.¹⁷

2.5 Dialogue between the Man and Others (vv.9b–15)

Verses 9b–15 present three dialogues of the man: with the religious leaders (vv.9b–13), with Jesus (v.14), and again with the religious leaders (v.15).

While Haenchen interprets the sabbatical conflict in v.9b as a transitional motif employed by the narrator,¹⁸ Brodie views it as a crucial element of the narrative that amplifies the creator-like approach he proposes. He argues that, just as Gen 1:1–2:3 sets the stage for the Sabbath, Jesus' creation-like healing inevitably resulted in a Sabbath-related conflict.¹⁹

The readers might be surprised by the Jews' reaction, as they seem unmoved by the healing itself. Instead, their focus is on the perceived violation of the sabbatical law,²⁰ and in their shift in interest from the man to the identity of the man "who said to you, 'Pick up your sleeping-mat and walk?'" (v.12)²¹

However, the man was unable to provide them with the response they were seeking. Hahn and van Eck argue that regardless of the man's response, his confession of Jesus was not positive and, as a result, he had failed as a witness when placed in comparison with the Samaritan woman (John 4) and with the man born blind (John 9).²²

To fully 'heal' the man, Jesus encounters him a second time. Culpepper notes that in the Gospel of John, Jesus often returns to individuals he has impacted,

¹⁶ Cf. Haenchen 1984, 245.

¹⁷ Cf. Brodie 1993, 237.

¹⁸ Cf. Haenchen 1984, 246.

¹⁹ Brodie identifies a creator-like approach to Jesus' pronouncement and what follows. He does so by comparing vv.8–9a; "... and Jesus said ... and at once ..." with the first creative narrative in Gen 1; "... let there be ... and there was ..." (Brodie 1993, 237).

²⁰ Cf. Haenchen 1984, 246.

²¹ Cf. Culpepper 1983, 91.

²² Cf. Hahn – van Eck 2021, 4.

particularly those who, after being affected, face challenges from Jesus' opponents.²³ The use of the verb εὐρίσκω confirms this assumption and indicates that the meeting was intentional, with the initiative taken by Jesus himself.²⁴

Jesus begins the dialogue with the statement ἴδε ὅλης γέγονας ("see you have become whole") in which the perfect tense is used to inform the reader of the man's new state of being; he has received a permanent healing which is not only physical but spiritual, as the continuation of the dialogue discloses.²⁵ The following statement, μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε, ἵνα μὴ χεῖρόν σοί τι γένηται ("sin no more, so that nothing worse happens to you"), has been a *crux interpretum* for centuries. Kubis outlines various scholarly positions on the connection between sin and sickness and the different kinds of sin of which the man was accused.²⁶ To corroborate the debate, Martin notes that the unfavourable reading of this verse has led to the depiction of the man as sinful. His moral character has been wrongly judged from his health condition, that is, he is a sinner because he is disabled.²⁷

Therefore, Martin proposes a "sacred imagination" approach to retelling the story. This model listens to the voices of the marginalised characters in the Bible with the mindset that most often the narrator ignores their voices. By using this model, the moral character of the man is not equated to sin and Jesus' final statement to the man is not related to the man's physical impairment, but rather to eternal judgement for all who do not have faith in Him.²⁸ Kubis adds that sin in this context refers to the past, present and future unbelief in Jesus or spiritual death.²⁹ However, Hahn and van Eck object that the man is spiritually dead and that, even after his encounter with Jesus, he does not repent.³⁰

In the author's opinion, the narrator intentionally leaves Jesus' statement open. The reader needs to fill in the gap entering in the narrative: the context suggests that Jesus' command not to sin is directed not only to the man but to anyone who encounters the text.

After meeting Jesus, the text introduces the last dialogue with the Jewish leaders. Haenchen considers the interaction as a narrative device intended to

23 Cf. Culpepper 1983, 110.

24 Cf. Kubiś 2022, 226.

25 Cf. Kubiś 2022, 207–8.

26 Cf. Kubiś 2022, 202–32.

27 Cf. Martin 2022, 246–9.

28 Cf. Martin 2022, 261–2.

29 Cf. Kubiś 2022, 206.

30 Cf. Hahn – van Eck 2021, 4.

prompt the ensuing discussion in the following verses.³¹ Brodie interprets the man's reaction as announcing the good news to the Jews. He supports his position with the man's reference to Jesus as the one having made him whole.³²

This paper supports Brodie's viewpoint, arguing that the man's shift in focus from testifying that Jesus was the one who broke the Sabbath to recognising him as the one who healed him reflects a positive response to Jesus.

2.6 Call to Action

More than his condition. The man at the pool of Bethesda is a central figure in the narrative.³³ From his first answer to Jesus to his final response to the Jews, the reader is surprised by him. He is a man with a condition for thirty-eight years, but his condition does not define him: he is capable of reasoning and dialoguing, as revealed in his interaction with Jesus. He encounters the giver of life and is able to understand him, take instructions from him and apply the instruction. He has an identity that is beyond his condition.

His *name is* ἄνθρωπος. The narrator's omission of his name has a perlocutionary effect on the reader; he is called ἄνθρωπος, meaning human being. This designation applies equally to both individuals with and without disabilities, underscoring their inherent equality. Acknowledging persons with disabilities as fully human is likely to affect how they are treated. By recognising the man as a human being, Jesus engaged with him on that basis, which consequently resulted in the man's healing.

Relationship with the 'other'. In the man's response to Jesus, he indicated that the absence of the 'other' in his life was a factor to his prolonged condition. The man took initiative to approach the pool; all he needed was the 'other', and yet none was available. This indicates the importance of the 'other' in people's lives, including persons with disabilities.

Jesus and the 'other'. The man, who had endured his condition for an extended period, encountered Jesus, resulting in a transformative change in his life. Although he had a condition, it did not constitute his entire identity. Jesus approached him proactively, without waiting for the man to request assistance. Jesus perceived beyond the man's condition to recognise a fellow human in silent need.

31 Cf. Haenchen 1984, 247–8.

32 Cf. Brodie 1993, 239–40.

33 Cf. Resseguie 2005, 123–4.

Integration into society. Malina and Rohrbaugh characterise this man as socially marginalised prior to his healing.³⁴ This view is corroborated by Hahn and van Eck who contend that the man's condition impeded his participation in socio-cultural activities, leading to his social isolation and alienation.³⁵ Following his healing, the reader encounters the man engaging in dialogue with Jesus and the Jewish authorities, as well as entering the temple, a signal that he had been integrated into the community.³⁶

The blind Jews. In John's Gospel, the religious leaders are "stubbornly and consistently rejecting the revelation that Jesus has come to bring."³⁷ Ashton argues that they consider themselves as already having the ultimate revelation, as their birth-right as descendants of Abraham and children of God. Therefore, they have no interest in the freedom offered by Jesus, because in their own eyes, they are already free. This attitude blinded them to the identity of Jesus and on what he had to offer. Thus, in the readers' perspective, they are the true blind who need healing (John 9:39–41).

Admonishment to the Reader. Jesus' admonishment to the man to "sin no more" is crucial for the reader. Different interpreters highlight the ambiguity of the statement, which encourages the readers to reflect on their own sins and attitude towards Jesus and any 'others'.

The situation described in the text bears resemblance to the context within the Ghanaian Christian community, where individuals with disabilities are present. The critical question is how they are perceived within this faith community. Consequently, it is essential to investigate whether the call to action emphasised in the narrative is mirrored in the practices and attitudes of believers in Ghana towards persons with disabilities.

3. An Analysis of the Ghanaian Christian Community

Disability is a multifaceted concept that can be understood from both medical and social perspectives. From a medical perspective, it is characterised by the inability of an individual to perform a mental or physical task that one should typically be capable of accomplishing.³⁸ On the other hand, the social

34 Cf. Malina – Rohrbaugh 1998, 111.

35 Cf. Hahn – van Eck 2021, 1.

36 Cf. Martin, Martin 2022, 262–3.

37 Ashton 2007, 68.

38 Cf. Michailakis 2003, 209.

perspective on disability considers the broader context in which an individual lives, the socio-economic, cultural and political disadvantages that generate exclusion and contribute to disability.³⁹

Over the years, there has been a significant shift towards integrating the medical and social definitions of disability; disability is not solely a medical condition but also a product of the interaction between personal factors and environmental circumstances.⁴⁰

The phenomenon is no different in the Ghanaian setting. Despite educational efforts and advocacy, stigmatisation, isolation and marginalisation persist as prevailing attitudes in society towards individuals with disabilities.⁴¹ Some Ghanaians continue to associate disability with punishment, witchcraft, sorcery, juju, magic, and evil spirits;⁴² people with disabilities are often considered misfits and social outcasts, sometimes treated as 'sub-humans'. The consequence of living with a disability in Ghana is thus, rejection and exclusion.⁴³ It, therefore, comes as no surprise that "persons with disability cease to be perceived as real people, a stigma that remains on them throughout their life in society."⁴⁴

Against this background, this study investigates how the encounter with Jesus Christ, lived in a specific denomination, contributes to a changed perception and interactions with individuals living with disabilities. The researcher conducted interviews and organised focus group discussions with 50 participants from St. John's Baptist Church, Tantra Hill, Ghana. The sample population encompassed a diverse range of young and older men and women, with ages spanning from 16 to 65 years, from different ethnic backgrounds. All participants were committed Christians, actively involved in various church-related activities.

Findings from the interactions have been categorised into four themes: perception of the causes of disability; the role of faith in understanding disability; living with people with disabilities; creating an inclusive community.

39 Cf. Michailakis 2003, 209–10; Anastasiou and Kauffman 2011, 367–84; Baffoe 2013, 187–8.

40 Cf. Baffoe 2013, 188.

41 Cf. Agbenyega 2003, 1–12.

42 Cf. Baffoe 2013, 187–89; Avoke 1997.

43 Cf. Agbenyega 2003, 1–12.

44 Agbenyega 2003, 8.

3.1 Perceptions of Causes of Disability

The findings revealed that while participants acknowledged that disability is not always perceived as having spiritual connotations, they believe that in certain cases it does carry spiritual significance. Disabilities were attributed to various factors, including curses resulting from conflicts (twenty-five participants), committing heinous sins such as incest, rape, and murder (thirty-two participants). Additionally, a smaller group of participants (five individuals) identified witchcraft as a potential cause of disability, stating that witches are real and possess the capability to inflict disabilities and related afflictions upon individuals for selfish reasons including hatred. One participant refrained from mentioning the term ‘disability’ because she believed that by mentioning the term, she was “opening her spiritual doors to welcoming disability into her family.”

Participants also identified accidents, genetic conditions, infections, medical factors, and old age as additional causes of disabilities. Notably, fourteen participants argued that spiritual connotations were always the underlying factors for these causes, citing Matthew 18:18 to support their perspective.

3.2 Role of Faith in Understanding Disability

Forty-eight participants reported that their perceptions of the causes of disability remained unchanged following their encounter with Jesus, with some asserting that their encounter reaffirmed their pre-existing beliefs. In contrast, two participants indicated that their faith contributed to their understanding that not all disabilities are attributed to sin, as elucidated by Jesus to his disciples in John 9:2–3.

3.3 Living With People With Disabilities

Although all participants were familiar with biblical passages related to disability, their emphasis was primarily on the accounts of healing rather than on strategies for living alongside individuals with such conditions. Eleven participants expressed the opinion that “if living with disability were a positive factor, Jesus would not have healed them.” One argued that “to tolerate disabilities is to undermine the healing power of Jesus.”

Whereas all participants acknowledged that persons living with disability were human beings, five participants indicated that they could not have them as friends due to the associated stigma, and twenty-three participants indicated they could not consider them as potential spouses because of the

associated stigma, temptation to infidelity, mockery, and reluctance to provide the additional support that a partner with a disability might require. However, seven expressed that their willingness to marry a person with a disability would depend on the nature of the disability.

One participant shared that his mother experiences mental disability; her condition often led to conflicts with neighbours. For example, they were asked to relocate because his mother's noise at night was considered a nuisance to neighbours. He shared that having a family member with a disability is a challenging situation, emphasising the role of faith: "Jesus showed love and gave a helping hand to all he came across, and so if I am unable to heal my mother, I can at least give her a helping hand such as loving her for who she is, supporting her emotionally and making sure all the medications are always available for her to take."

3.4 Overcoming Barriers and Creating an Inclusive Community

All participants acknowledged the existence of barriers faced by individuals with disabilities. Additionally, recognising their own cultural biases, participants agreed on the importance of creating an environment that is welcoming and supportive of individuals with disabilities, affirming that all humans are created in the image of God. They also noted that since Jesus set an example by welcoming and assisting individuals with disabilities, Christians should emulate his actions. Participants committed to becoming more aware of the needs of individuals with disabilities and to providing them with appropriate support.

4. Dialogue Between the Text and the Ghanaian Christian Community

Interactions with members of the Ghanaian Christian community indicate that, although individuals with disabilities are present within the faith community, traditional cultural beliefs often exert a stronger influence on attitudes and behaviours regarding persons with disabilities. Consequently, there remains significant progress to be made in recognising individuals beyond their disabilities and fostering meaningful inclusion. The call to action outlined in John 5:1–15 offers a framework that the faith community can adopt to promote inclusivity and become a more welcoming church.

The Ghanaian faith community should recognise the transformative role that conversion plays in the lives of believers. As disciples of Christ, it is imperative

to adopt the perspective of Jesus and emulate his actions. It is essential for the faith community to view individuals with disabilities as human beings created in the image of God; individuals possessing capabilities, aspirations, strengths and limitations.

Although the faith community operates within a society that marginalises individuals with disabilities, churches must acknowledge that vulnerability and suffering were integral aspects of Jesus' ministry and as such, should serve as centres for integration and advocacy.⁴⁵ Frequently, however, even churches that demonstrate genuine concern often position these individuals primarily as recipients of pastoral care, rather than integrating their perspectives and experiences into the development of Christian communal life. Badetti thus envisions a future in which persons with disabilities will become active pastoral agents, contributing to the narrative of pastoral care in disability.⁴⁶

Following the example of Jesus, the faith community should lead efforts to challenge and transform prevailing perspectives in Ghana about individuals with disabilities and how to coexist with them. Instead of reinforcing existing stereotypes and norms, the community should work to redefine and challenge these attitudes and practices. Findings, however, revealed that individuals within the faith community are not conscious of how to coexist with persons with disability; as a result, it is important that sermons focus not only on their healing, but also on their inclusion and discipleship.

5. Conclusion

Individuals with disabilities frequently encounter various forms of discrimination and barriers, which undermine their ability to participate in society on an equal footing with other citizens.⁴⁷ Embedded within cultural attitudes is often a latent fear of disability, leading to its frequent association with sin. This connection is, regrettably, reinforced by historical interpretations of the Bible within the church, which have, to an extent, contributed to the stigmatisation of disability as sinful. Such associations exacerbate the existential struggles faced by individuals with disabilities, who continue to wrestle with questions of personal suffering and discrimination.⁴⁸

45 Cf. Arulampalam 2020, 80–8.

46 Cf. Badetti 2020, 56.

47 Cf. Donatello 2020, 30.

48 Cf. Reinders 2020, 13–20.

The community of Jesus was characterised by inclusivity. As such, the Christian denominations should also constitute an inclusive environment where individuals with disabilities feel a sense of belonging.⁴⁹ Rather than consistently being positioned as recipients of charity, individuals with disabilities advocate for empowerment and equal rights. Furthermore, when charity is provided, it should be offered in a manner that upholds their inherent human dignity.⁵⁰

Over the past century, education has been instrumental in creating new opportunities for individuals with disabilities.⁵¹ The Ghanaian Christian community should adopt this model to effectuate change within the faith community and the society at large, thereby transforming prevailing attitudes towards individuals with disabilities and fostering more inclusive practices for coexistence.

In conclusion, two significant approaches to disability theology include the 'charity model', which advocates for Christian assistance, and an alternative approach that regards theology as the 'master narrative', emphasising the inherent value of disability through frameworks of friendship and belonging. This study, therefore, advocates for the implementation of the second model and affirms the full humanity of individuals with disabilities, framing them as brothers and sisters, rather than victims. The Ghanaian faith community is thus called to emulate Jesus, extending the love of God to all individuals, irrespective of their condition.⁵²

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49 Cf. Huang 2020, 58–65.

50 Cf. Masters 2020, 69–79.

51 Cf. Donatello 2020, 30.

52 Cf. Reinders 2020, 13–23.

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Paul's Report on God and Resurrection in Acts 17:16–34: Model of a Religiously Responsible Speech in a Plural World

Marievonne Schöttner

1. Are People Still Being Reached by the Church in Germany?

In Germany, the changes in religious environment are striking: while 35% of the population were Catholic in 1990, the German Bishops' Conference working aid for 2022/2023 lists only 20.9% Catholics.¹ This decline is generally associated with the scandals in the Catholic Church in Germany, which have been continuing for over 10 years, and the resulting questions about power structures, dealing with sexuality and the position of women. At the same time, according to the latest studies, the segment of Catholics who feel like Christians without the church meaning much to them has been growing steadily in recent years (2002: 31%; 2020: 34%). It also shows that the decline in church membership does not mean that religiosity gets less important to the population. The proportion of people who describe themselves as religious has remained stable over the past 25 years; 42% to 49% of Catholics consider themselves religious. Furthermore the content of faith is remarkable. 74% of Catholics believe in God, while only 61% of Catholics profess faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. In addition, the idea of life after death is much more widespread among Catholics than the belief in the resurrection of the dead in the kingdom of God (55% compared to 39%).²

These survey results underline the need for target group-oriented communication by the church in our pluralistic world and evoke the following questions: How can church services become visible at all? How can church speak to

1 Cf. https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Zahlen%20und%20Fakten/Kirchliche%20Statistik/Allgemein_-_Zahlen_und_Fakten/AH-339_DBK_BRO_ZuF_2022-2023_WEB.pdf (27.08.2024).

2 Cf. Sombre, Calmbach and Gensheimer 2012, 42–59.

people in an understandable way? How can the question of God and salvation be asked today?³

2. Paul's Speech in Athens (Acts 17:16–34)

In this speech at or in front of the Areopagus⁴ Paul speaks publicly for the first time in Acts of the Apostles to an exclusively Gentile audience; this is undoubtedly one of the highlights of his missionary activity.⁵ How Paul manages to inspire pagans with enthusiasm for himself and the Christian message and the extent to which this pericope is also an example of religiously responsible speech about God and salvation today will be subject of the following study.

2.1 Context and Structure

Paul comes together with Silas and Timothy to Greece on his second missionary journey (15:35–18:22). In Thessalonica, he preaches in the synagogue to Jews and God-fearers; he soon must leave the city due to opposition from Jews (17:1–9). His stay in Berea, where he again teaches in the synagogue, is also ended by the hostile intervention of Jews (17:10–14). Finally, he is taken to Athens alone and there he waits for his two traveling companions (17:15).

The pericope about the Areopagus speech (17:16–34) can be divided into three sections: Paul's speech in the middle (17:22–31) is framed by an introduction about Paul's expedition through Athens (17:16–21) and a concluding section about the reaction of the listeners to his words (17:32–34).

3 The essay does not provide instructions for Christian missionaries on how they should speak of God in a pluralistic world. Rather, it is intended as an impulse to discuss one's own attitude towards speaking responsibly about God and resurrection.

4 It is disputed whether the Areopagus is the Ares hill northwest of the Acropolis (cf. Haacker 2019, 296–7; Klauck 1996, 95; Zmijewski 1994, 640) or an authority in the manner of a court of justice (cf. Jipp 2012, 573; Keener 2014, 2600–2; Pesch 2014, 135). From a purely linguistic point of view, the formulations (ἐπὶ τὸν Ἄρειον πάγον [17:19]; ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ Ἀρείου πάγου [17:22]) can mean both the mound of Ares and the judicial authority. The latter would mean that Paul stands before the court as a defendant and delivers an apologia – but this is not the case in 17:22–31, so there is much to be said for the first interpretation.

5 Rothschild 2014, 3, even judges Paul's speech in Athens as “the highpoint of the first early Christian history.”

2.2 Exegetical Studies

The first section about Paul's appearance in Athens (17:16–21) creates an unmistakable image of the city. While Paul waits for Silas and Timothy, he strolls through this small town like a tourist.⁶ On his tour, he becomes enraged because he sees the town full of idols (κατείδωλος) (17:16).⁷ The usual pattern of preaching – first to Jews, then to Gentiles – is modified here (17:17). Paul seems to be doing both at the same time in Athens, i.e. preaching to Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue (especially on the Sabbath) and having daily conversations with passers-by, the Gentiles, in the marketplace.⁸ Among the people in the agora are also followers of the two leading philosophical movements of the time, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Their judgment of Paul is not friendly at all; they call him a “babbler” (σπερμολόγος) and consider him a “preacher of foreign divinities”⁹, as he talks about Jesus and the resurrection (Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἀνάστασις)¹⁰ (17:18). Thereupon the philosophers take him (ἐπιλαμβάνω)¹¹ to the Areopagus for further discussion – not for interrogation (17:19); they want to learn more about his words, which according to them contain “some strange things” (17:20). Paul now explains this new teaching in public (17:21).

The second section of the actual speech (17:22–31) begins with the indication that Paul – in the sense of an ancient orator – places himself in the middle of his intellectually educated audience (17:22). His following speech begins with an introduction (*exordium*) (17:22–23). The main part consists of an argumentation (*argumentatio*) (17:24–29) before he summarises his words

6 At the time of the apostle's missionary activity in the middle of the 1st century, Athens was only a provincial city with around 5,000 inhabitants (by comparison, Corinth had around 100,000 inhabitants). In the Mediterranean region, Athens continued to fascinate as a city of art and science, to which the educated of the Greco-Roman world flocked for at least a brief visit.

7 The density of cult buildings in Athens is also described in Liv.45,27,11; Paus. 1,14,1–15,4; Jos. c.Ap. 2,130.

8 Discussing with those present in the agora is a typical Athenian custom and is reminiscent of Socrates, who also debated with passers-by in the marketplace. Cf. Plato, Ap 17c; 29d; 33a. On the Socrates mimesis of the Pauline figure in this speech, see fundamentally Marguerat 2022, 66–77.

9 This is also based on a memory of Socrates, who is regarded as a propagandist of foreign deities and is condemned to death on this charge. Cf. Xen, Mem 1,1,1, with Klauck 1996, 91.

10 That Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἀνάστασις (17:18) is a pair of gods, in which ἀνίστημι is the female deity assigned to the god Jesus, can be ruled out at the latest with the mention of the resurrection (ἀνίστημι [17:31]; ἀνάστασις [17:32]). Cf. Pesch 2014, 134.

11 On the interpretation of ἐπιλαμβάνω in the sense of a public hearing, cf. W. Schmithals, Apg 160, and R. I. Pervo, Acts 428 (“arrest”).

with a conclusion (*peroratio*) (17:30–31).¹² At the beginning of the speech, in the *exordium*, Paul starts with the words “men of Athens” – a typical Socratic formulation¹³ – and continues with a flattery (*captatio benevolentiae*): “[...] I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (17:22). He justifies the attribution of his listeners as extremely religious people by the fact that he came during his tour of Athens across an altar with the inscription “To an unknown God” (Ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ). The fact that Paul uses the singular form θεός here – the archaeological and literary evidence for altar inscriptions so far speaks of “the unknown gods” (plural!)¹⁴ – helps him to prepare the Athenians for the proclamation of the one God of the Bible. Until now, they had been worshipping something (δ) (neuter!) unknowingly, which Paul can now tell them more about (17:23). The main part of the speech consists of three stages of argumentation about the one God, the *argumentatio*. In the first part (17:24–25), Paul defines the previously unknown God as the biblical Creator God, who made the world and everything in it. His vocabulary here is based on the creation statement of the Septuagint (Isa 42:5). At the same time, he immerses himself in the Greek Stoic world of language when he speaks of the creation of the world (κόσμος) (Acts 17:24) – instead of the Old Testament word “earth” (γῆ). Through the inculturation of this biblical God-speech into the Greek horizon of thought, a Stoic can affirm this statement, even if he understands it pantheistically.¹⁵ Furthermore, following the biblical tradition and the language of Greek philosophy, Paul characterises God as one who does not dwell in handmade (χειροποίητος)¹⁶ temples and who does not allow himself to be served by human hands (Acts 17:25).¹⁷ With this statement, he contradicts Greek polytheistic popular piety, which is also a thorn in the side of his audience of philosophers. In the second step (Acts 17:26–27), Paul explains that the Creator of the world is also the Creator of the entire human race. He begins by stating, in accordance with the biblical concept of creation (Gen 1:27–28), that man was created from one (Acts 17:26). Although Paul omits the name “Adam,”¹⁸ and the phrase “from

12 Cf. Marguerat 2013, 619–28.

13 Cf. Plato, Ap 1a.b; 2a.

14 Cf. Paus, 1.1.14; 5.14.8; Philostr., Vit Ap 6.3.5; Diog L, Vit Phil 1.110.

15 Cf. Epict., Diss 4.7.6: “God created everything that is in the world (θεός πάντα πεποίηκεν τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ).” Cf. Pervo 2009, 434.

16 In the LXX, the adjective χειροποίητος is used as a term for idolatry (Lev 26:1; Isa 2:18; 10:11).

17 Cf. Plut., Mor 1034b: “A further principle of Zeno is that there is no need to build temples to the gods.” For further passages on idolatry criticism in the LXX and Greek philosophy, see Jipp 2012, 579–581. This cult criticism is based on the motif of God’s needlessness, which is also an OT (Ps 50:12–13; 2 Macc 14:35) and Stoic topos (Sen., Ep 95:47).

18 This is the stylistic device of antonomasia, whereby a person is presented as a certain type and brought from the past into the present. Cf. Lausberg 2008, 580–1.

one" (ἐξ ἐνός) also allows a neutral reading in the sense of the Stoic idea that "everything arose from a single principle," the audience can agree with this statement without hesitation.¹⁹ Moreover, his following statement about the search for God (Acts 17:27) has both biblical (Deut 4:29; Am 5:4) and philosophical resonance (Sen., Ep 95,47). He thus holds out the prospect that God is close to people and can be found.²⁰ In the third part (Acts 17:28–29), Paul explains the proximity between the divine and the human with the help of a quote from the poet Aratus (310–245 BCE), which is introduced as a scriptural quotation: "[...] as even some of your own poets have said: For we are indeed his offspring." (17:28).²¹ Paul then concludes from man's kinship with God that no idols should be worshipped (Acts 17:29). He can easily win over the philosophers as coalition partners for this criticism of worship, the Bible's sharpest affront to Hellenistic polytheism (Deut 4:28; Wis 13:10).²² In the conclusion of his speech, *peroratio* (Acts 17:30–31), Paul does not stop formulating similarities, but addresses points of difference to Greek philosophy: The Christian God calls all people to repentance (17:30). The urgency of repentance is justified by the impending judgment. Thus, God judges in righteousness through a man. God raised this man (ἄνθρωπος) – meaning Jesus – from the dead (ἀνίστημι αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν) and appointed him as the future judge (17:31). His lecture ends somewhat surprisingly with this Christological statement,²³ but it also says what is decisively Christian: the necessity of repentance before the horizon of the coming judgement and the resurrection of Jesus.

The final section of the pericope (17:32–34) presents the different reactions of the listeners to Paul's words. The point of discussion is the resurrection, which some Athenians misunderstand not as the resurrection of Jesus, but as the resurrection of the dead (ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν) (17:32). In a culture that, at least since Plato, only expects the soul to live on after death,²⁴ the idea of a bodily resurrection must be disconcerting. In the sense of the Hellenistic anthropology of body-soul dualism, the soul separates from the body after

19 The idea of the creation of the entire human race ἐξ ἐνός evokes the stoic idea of a single primordial principle. Cf. J. Zmijewski, Apg 643.

20 Similarly, Sen, Ep 41,1–2 says: "God is close to you, he is with you, he is in you."

21 Cf. "We are of his lineage": Arat., Phaen 5; cf. Aristobul, Frgm 4 in Eus., Praep Ev 13,3–8. Cf. Wittkowsky 2009, 108. There is also an allusion to the Stoic Zeus hymn (v.4–5) by Kleantes: "For we are of your (i.e. Zeus') lineage. We have redeemed the image of God – as the only ones of all that lives and moves on earth." For more details, see Klauck 1996, 104.

22 The Stoa also criticises any materialistic concept of God (Sen., Ep 95,47). Cf. Fitzmyer 1998, 611.

23 Cf. Pervo 2009, 440.

24 On the immortality of the soul see, for example, Plato, Phaid 70d–84b.

death and faces a kind of judgment.²⁵ In short, for a dualistic Greek it is impossible to speak of the resurrection of the dead. For this reason, Paul's speech is met with derision and disinterest by most listeners. Paul leaves the meeting (17:33). Only a few men accept his message, including Dionysius the Areopagite (ὁ Ἀρεοπαγίτης),²⁶ i.e. a member of the court, and a woman named Damaris (Acts 17:34).²⁷

2.3 Impulses for Interreligious Communication

Paul's speech in Athens (17:16–34) represents the first attempt in Acts to express the Christian belief in the Creator God and the resurrection of Jesus in non-biblical categories. It is also obvious that we primarily hear Paul's words; we know almost nothing about the response of the audience (apart from 17:32). Interreligious competence thrives on dialogue, on listening to and responding to one another. Nonetheless, this pericope represents a model for interreligious discourse, insofar as it can sharpen one's own sensitivity when communicating religious content in a pluralistic world. Based on this pericope I would like to emphasise four basic attitudinal impulses for more interreligious communication:

(1) Dare to Meet

In Athens, Paul does not wait until he is approached by people but approaches them to bring them closer to the Christian message. In doing so, he does not seek out conversations in private, but in public spaces, namely in religious and social centres: he speaks to Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue and turns towards the Gentiles in the marketplace. He is already familiar with the synagogue as a place of proclamation (e.g. 13:42–48; 14:1–2; 17:1–9), but not the agora. There are also philosophers among the people in the marketplace – which is also new to him. This willingness to communicate requires courage and stepping out of one's own comfort zone.

25 In the case of serious guilt, she must reckon with severe punishment, but if she is pure, she may take the path to heaven; she may also reach the show of immortal ideas. Cf. Müller 2009, 191–9.

26 This Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens (Eus., *Hist Eccl.* 3,4,10; 4,23,3).

27 The text does not indicate that Damaris is the wife of Dionysius (according to J. W. Jipp, *Areopagus* 588). In the *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis* (D 05), one of the most important witnesses to the western text of Acts, Damaris is not even mentioned.

(2) Strengthening Common Ground

In his lecture on God and resurrection, Paul begins with focusing on similarities between himself and his philosophically educated listeners. He exploits affinities between the concept of God in the Hellenistic religious world and the biblical God to the utmost: “God is creator of the world,” “God does not dwell in temples made by human hands” or “God made everything from one principle.”²⁸ In all of this, he dispenses with biblical evidence that would create incomprehension and alienation; he uses a term that initially creates a common ground on which both sides can easily find their feet.

(3) Don't Withhold the Essentials

From this common ground, Paul brings up what is decisively Christian: the need for repentance in the face of judgment and the resurrection of the man (i.e. Jesus). These statements give his addressees a Christological turning point – previously everything was comparable to the Old Testament and Greek philosophy. Although this section on the resurrection is surprisingly short in contrast to the previous speech about God, the reference to repentance and redemption is a core Christian theme.

(4) Placed in Freedom

The reaction to this speech is disappointing for Paul: most of his listeners do not take the central step of learning more about this resurrected man and the Christian message. Some mock him, others politely say goodbye and only a few of them agree with his speech.²⁹ But Paul does not force them to decide. He has done his part. Whether people allow themselves to be captured and changed by his words is up to them. His message gives everyone the freedom to say no.

3. Try Walking in My Shoes

Paul's speech in Athens is both inspiring and thought-provoking. In these times of crisis in the Church in Germany, it is on the one hand a hope-giving impulse to confidently carry the good news of God, Jesus and the resurrection into the

²⁸ Cf. Hoppe 2009, 120.

²⁹ This only modest success is consistent with the minor importance that Athens obviously played for early Christianity. Paul himself only briefly mentions his stay in Athens (1 Thess 3:1). The Athenian church had remained very small; it had to orient itself towards the much larger church of Corinth. Cf. Dormeyer 2003, 181.

world. This gospel can be convincing. On the other hand, this pericope evokes the following questions: When and where do we get the chance to talk about the gospel today? How do we reach people who have nothing (more) to do with the church? Where do we find them, how do we invite them and where? And would they even accept the invitation to talk?

Paul teaches us in Athens how a milieu-sensitive approach to interreligious speech can be shaped. The key is empathy in the sense of “Try walking in my shoes”³⁰: you must speak differently to every audience, present your own cause differently. In every case, a bridge needs to be built. Interreligious speech – if it wants to follow in Paul’s footsteps – should always think in terms of the target audience and be designed accordingly. Paul speaks of his God in such a way that the addressees, who are in a completely different religious tradition, can understand him well. To do this, he uses a terminology that he has borrowed from his listeners. At the same time, he sets himself apart from his audience with his Christian talk of salvation. Finally, it should also be noted that interreligious dialogue may lead to the risk of blurring one’s own identity or not expressing the specifics of one’s own convictions clearly enough. This risk must be taken. Interreligious speech is a balancing act that must be performed again and again in the field of tension between inculturation and evangelisation.

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30 “Try walking in my shoes” is a line from the pop song “Walking in My Shoes” by the band “Depeche Mode” from 1993.

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EPISTLES



All Creation Groans in Pain: An Exegetical Reading of Rom 8:18–23

George Ossom-Batsa

Introduction

In recent times, the fragility of the social order and the environment, and the need for salvation have gained the attention of the academic community as well as world political and religious leaders. The many wars in different parts of the world, for example, in Ethiopia, Sudan, Congo, Burkina Faso, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, and Ukraine-Russia have led to the loss of many lives. All of this has created deep wounds, serious instabilities and the massive immigration of many people leading to fragile relationships. Furthermore, epidemics such as HIV-AIDs, Ebola and cholera outbreaks in Africa have also claimed several lives and left devastating effects on human society. Recently the COVID-19 pandemic shook all nations and revealed the porous and fragile nature of human existence. Its effects are evident in the financial crises and near collapse of the economies of many countries, especially poorer nations.

Amid all of this, the issue of climate change, largely caused by human activities many times motivated by inappropriate political decisions, greed and corruption, has resulted in various environmental crises – drought; flooding; the pollution of water bodies, air, sea; deforestation; desertification; and bush fires. The precarious nature of the crises was recognised by Pope Benedict XVI at the beginning of his pontificate in 2005 when he stated:

And there are so many kinds of deserts. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore, the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's Garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction. The Church as a whole and all her pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the

desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance.¹

In 2015, Pope Francis also called the world's attention to the environmental crises and offered Rom 8:22 at the beginning of his encyclical *Laudato Si'* as the document's hermeneutic key:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she 'groans in travail' (Rom 8:22).²

Thus, not only the social order (humans) but the fragile environment (creation) cries out for salvation. But to be saved by whom? God? Or human beings? Or both? Notably, salvation involves both God and humans. So, I am tempted to say that the call is to all humanity, with the Church playing the leadership role of the voice of the voiceless. The Church is, in fact, to be the voice of wailing humans as well as the non-human created order.

Some fundamental questions to ask in the context of the theme of this project are: How can the Christian Scriptures guide the socio-ecological conversion which the Popes, particularly the Holy Father Pope Francis, continually remind us about? What is the influence of theology on society in our contemporary times? And what are we to be saved from? And for what?

In discussing salvation in world crises, especially ecological ones, one of the frequently cited texts is Rom 8:18–23, in which Paul affirms nature's worth as humanity's partner in the redemptive work of Christ.³ Though Rom 8:18–23 has been widely studied, a re-reading in different contexts (Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe) always produces fresh and new insights. Furthermore, as Pope Francis has repeatedly affirmed, biblical and theological reflections should not only *listen to* but also become the *voice* of the 'groaning earth', given that environmental issues are global and determine the future of creation at large. That is why, the 'mystical' body of Christ, the Church, which continues

1 Benedict XVI 2005. According to Noceti, the Church has "to face up to the new cultural climate and to rethink itself in this context of the widespread fragility" (Noceti 2008, 138).

2 Pope Francis 2015, n. 2.

3 Cf. Tonstad 2008, 141; Horrell 2021, 3–30.

the mission of Christ in our world in every age, has to tirelessly proclaim the love of God in creation.

It is against this background that I propose to read Rom 8:18–23 in its literary and socio-cultural context to establish how the theme of the environment, of the redemption of non-human creation, fits into the Letter's purpose and offers a Christian response to the ecological crises that have plagued the world, with special reference to Ghana. Thus, I will approach my topic from a biblical theological perspective within the framework of African biblical hermeneutics.⁴

To achieve this objective, the first part of my contribution explores the passage's literary and cultural/ideological contexts to highlight various narrative and thematic links and ideological issues relevant to interpretation, while the second part examines the text's syntactic and semantic composition to understand its communicative function and perlocutionary effect. In the last part, I will illustrate the impact of an ecological reading of the text for the Christian community that lives in the Ghanaian context, which may apply to other regions of the world far away from mine.

1. Exegetical Analysis: Rom 8:18–23

To examine the ecological perspectives of our passage, we ought to verify their resonance in the argumentative context of the entire Letter.⁵ Several authors have explored this approach and have arrived at interesting results. For example, Robert Jewett studied Rom 8:18–23 by discussing the idea of the destruction and redemption of creation within the context of Roman imperial ideology.⁶ The main stimulating aspect of this approach is the discovery of thematic links among the various themes of the Letter and the discussion on how all contribute towards achieving the communicative purpose of the Letter. Interpreters of Romans agree that its central and programmatic theme, namely, God's righteousness in salvation and the Gospel's power, was announced in 1:16–17. Paul links each theme he develops to 'salvation' as the revelation of God's gratuitous love. While the Adam story brought corruption through sin, faith in Christ brings redemption (3:9–21). In adhering to Christ, believers receive justification (5:9–10).

4 In simple language, African biblical hermeneutics is an interpretation that highlights the African context as a key element in the interpretive process. For further explanation, cf. Ossom-Batsa 2014, 116–34; West 2015, 235–61; Adamo 2015, 59–72.

5 Cf. Byrne, 2010, 83–93; Horrell, Hunt, Southgate and Stavrakopoulou 2010.

6 Cf. Jewett 2017; Jewett 2004, 24–46.

After the long discourse on the law of ‘sin and death’ in chapters 6 and 7, Rom 8 opens with a reflection on the “Spirit of life” (vv.1–17), which precedes our passage. This pericope reiterates the central point: the graciousness of God made manifest in Jesus Christ – “he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who dwells in you” (8:11).⁷

In Rom 8:18–23, Paul expands the horizon to include all creation, namely, non-humans, in the beneficiaries of God’s salvation. Appropriating prophetic and apocalyptic language, he attests vigorously to how the entire created order awaits redemption in Jesus Christ.⁸ From this hope of redemption springs forth the call to the Christian community to practise justice in relating to God, the other and the entire creation (vv.9–16).

Our passage is set in a context where Paul directs his readers’ attention to the hope that awaits them (5:1–5) and then focuses on the phenomenon of suffering (8:18). In three brief pericopes characterised by the repetition of the same lexical root, στενάζ (vv.22, 23) and στεναγμοῖς (v.26), he analyses the groaning that comes from all creation: non-human (vv.19–22), human (vv.23–25) and even the Spirit’s (vv.26–27).

This text stands out uniquely for analysing Paul’s thinking on the redemptive work of Christ given the fact that the entire letter is about ‘salvation’, and that it is only in 8:18–30 that Paul suggests that both humans and non-humans are beneficiaries or subjects of God’s righteousness. But what does it mean for non-humans to be liberated from suffering?

1.1 Suffering and Glory: A Common Destiny

Verse 18 has an introductive value. Paul contrasts the τὰ παθήματα (suffering) of the present against the δόξαν (glory) to be revealed (ἀποκαλυφθῆναι). He had already dealt with the theme in preceding chapters where he demonstrated that suffering became the human condition due to the disobedience of Adam (ἀλλὰ καὶ καυχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν, εἰδότες ὅτι ἡ θλίψις ὑπομονὴν κατεργάζεται, ἡ δὲ ὑπομονὴ δοκιμὴν, ἡ δὲ δοκιμὴ ἐλπίδα, Rom 5:3–4). Many scholars have also noted syntactic and semantic ambiguities in the entire passage, which largely affect the passage’s interpretation. For example, what does Paul mean by τῆς κτίσεως (creation)? Is it an inclusive term (humans and non-humans), or does it refer only to non-humans?⁹

⁷ Cf. Byrne 2010, 86.

⁸ Cf. Byrne 2010, 88.

⁹ Cf. Dunn 1991, 469.

The debate on an inclusive meaning/restrictive sense has gone on for many years. However, considering the authoritative assertive context of the passage, we accept the reasons for those who maintain a restrictive meaning of the term.¹⁰ Therefore, non-human creation should be understood as the subject that “is waiting with eager longing” (ἀπεκδέχεται), that “was subjected to futility” (ὑπετάγη), hoping that it “will be set free” (ἐλευθερωθήσεται, 19–21). The verses’ temporal structure suggests a past, present and future status, which resonates with God’s intervention per his salvific plan. The past and present status of creation is subjection “to futility” (ματαιότης).

With the emphatic use of the syntagma οἶδαμεν γὰρ ὅτι (“we know that,” v.22), Paul seems to appeal to knowledge that he could reasonably presume his readers share to strengthen his arguments. Though most interpreters refer to the story of the fall (Gen 3:17–19) as the basis of Paul’s affirmation, other scholars think that the interpretative background should include the prophetic conception of the cosmic alliance. An explanation in favour of this belief is that the oppression of the ‘brother/sister’ provokes God’s judgement not only on the humans responsible but also on all of creation: “In the prophets, on the other hand, we find the notion that the non-human creation as a whole suffers the effects of human sin and God’s judgement on it.”¹¹

In vv.22–23, Paul concludes his discourse on the suffering of creation and indicates how it co-suffers futility with human beings in anticipation of redemption. The verb συστενάζει (“groan together”) in v.22 is the compound of the στενάζομεν (“we ourselves groan”) in v.23. Later in v.26, Paul uses the noun form of the verb, στεναγμός (“sigh or groan”). With the use of στενάζομεν (“we ourselves groan”) and συστενάζει (“groan together”), Paul seems to place the present situation of human decay and suffering on a parallel to that of non-human creation to underline the fact that both categories eagerly await their restoration.

“Not only” (οὐ μόνον δέ) does creation join in the ‘eschatological groaning’, but it joins “we ourselves” (ἡμεῖς καὶ αὐτοὶ) as we groan “in ourselves” (ἐν ἑαυτοῖς) in anticipation of our adoption as children. The use of a common vocabulary to describe creation, humanity and the Spirit emphasises how these are all caught up in the same process, expecting the same outcome.

10 Cf. Hahne 2006, 176–81. Cf. also the discussion in Hunt, Horrell and Southgate 2008, 566.

11 Bauckham 2010, 97.

1.2 Liberation of Creation: Work of God or Human Collaboration?

Whereas Paul is specific about the restoration of humans (“... but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies,” 8:23), he is rather ambiguous about that of non-humans. Therefore, the hermeneutical questions are: How are non-humans to be restored? What role do humans play in the liberation of creation?

My view is that for Paul, the hope of the liberation of creation from subjection to futility is tied to human transformation achieved through the Christ event. The decay suffered because of Adam’s disobedience and subjection to futility by God, which affected the whole created order, has been restored by the death and resurrection of Christ and will definitively be realised in the eschatological glory of Christ (5:12; cf. 1 Cor 15:22).¹² This transformation through the paschal mystery places a responsibility on humans to be stewards of creation until Christ returns and, as co-workers with God, to bring new things into existence and to establish new patterns of order in creation (8:20).

As ‘co-workers of God’, believers are, first of all, to champion the creation of a just social, economic and political system in which the rights and dignity of each human being are respected. When individuals and the Church at large rediscover their mission and authentically live their vocation, gradually there will be harmony in creation.

2. Christianity and Socio-Environmental Crises in Ghana: A Possible Journey?

At the end of our analysis, the question spontaneously arises: What educative principles does the Letter to the Romans offer Christians regarding ecological sensitivity? Since the context of a reader is an essential element in responding to God’s Word, I offer my response to the above question by examining the reality of the socio-environmental crises where I live and work – Ghana.

There is no doubt that socio-environmental crises have a devastating impact on Ghanaians. Over the past decades, the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference has repeatedly mentioned this in its annual communique. In its 2006 communique, they wrote:

¹² Cf. Hunt, Horrell and Southgate 2008, 568.

If we think that at the turn of the century Ghana possessed about 90,000 hectares of forest and that this has been reduced to about 20,000 hectares, then we must realise that we are heading headlong towards environmental disaster. With the destruction of the environment, our very survival is threatened.¹³

This quote acknowledges the fragility of the social, economic and political systems as well as the environmental crises. On the environmental front, we can note severe desertification and deforestation.¹⁴ In recent years, many have lamented the decreasing concern for preserving trees globally, especially in Africa.¹⁵

Because of poor surveillance, large portions of Ghana's arable lands have become deserts through human activities, such as *galamsey*,¹⁶ land grabbing,¹⁷ lack of sanitation and effective waste management, unsustainable fishing and farming, and several unmanaged mining site pits.¹⁸ Furthermore, due to the heavy reliance on wood for fuel and timber for export, Ghana's forests holding important wood species, such as rosewood, and animals have diminished greatly.¹⁹ Gatti has rightly noted that "the degradation of the environment is one of the causes of growing poverty and the massive emigration of young people."²⁰ The costs to the health and productive system are well documented.²¹ Attitude towards the land and the environment have resulted directly or indirectly in several socio-economic and political crises. For example, indiscriminate mining activities have made many subsistence farmers poorer and a few elite *galamsayers* richer.

We need to note that indigenous cultures have mechanisms for minimising and preventing exploitation and the destruction of the earth in Ghana. However, with the arrival of Christianity, especially the Pentecostal and Charismatic waves, the picture changed drastically. For example, practices such as not farming or clearing the land near river bodies because of the sacredness

13 Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference 2006, 223; Gatti 2018, 155–84.

14 Cf. Mante 2014, 14.

15 Cf. Howell 2017, 12.

16 Illegal mining is popularly referred to as *galamsey* in Ghana which comes from two English words, 'gather' and 'sell'.

17 Cf. Hall 2011.

18 Cf. Oteng-Ababio, Ablo and Wong 2020, 26–32; Blacksmith Institute 2013; Smith-Asante 2015.

19 Statistics available from the United Nations Environmental Programme indicate that between 1990 and 2005, Ghana lost 26% of its forest, which is equivalent to 1,931,000 hectares of her arable lands (UNEP).

20 Cf. Gatti 2022; Paone and Richmond 2017, 1–11.

21 Cf. World Health Organization 2022; World Bank 2020.

of the rivers and not farming in certain forest areas because they are believed to be the habitations of the gods, have all been interpreted as 'pagan' by Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian preachers and churches. Unfortunately, the respect for the sacredness of the land and environment inherent in the traditional religions has been abandoned or relegated to the background due to contradictory Christian witnessing.

The 'prosperity gospel' theology of the Prophetic Churches educates adherents to exploit the environment for wealth because it is God's gift to them. Thus, it makes wealth the proof of one's faith.²² Such a theological position, which undermines the value and independence of the non-human created order, has gradually gained wider acceptance, deepening the fragility of the socio-economic and environmental systems.

Recognising the fragility of the Ghanaian socio-economic and political systems, three years ago in a press conference, the Christian Council of Ghana, the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, the National Association of Charismatic and Christian Churches, and the National Chief Imam's Office called the attention of all Ghanaians to the socio-environmental crises in the country and the need for change or transformation. However, besides calling for a week of fasting and prayer, they did not, unfortunately, suggest any transformative ethical behaviours for its citizens in view of a responsible, holistic, human and community sustainable development.²³ Pondering the frailty of the human condition and environmental degradation challenges us to explore how the Word of God can become an educational tool.

Conclusion

An encounter with Romans could challenge Ghanaian Christian believers to rethink ways of living the justice of God that will impact the life of every Ghanaian, Christian and non-Christian alike. Ghanaian Christians should evaluate the values in the culture concerning the sacredness of non-human creation, which deserves respect and protection like humans. Furthermore, educated by Paul, Christians can discover that all creation, human and non-human, is God's handiwork destined for harmony but condemned to futility due to Adam's disobedience. Therefore, nature merits the same respect and protection as human beings. Like the original addressees of the Letter, contemporary

22 Cf. Wrenn 2021, 295–311; Heuser 2015, 15–24.

23 Cf. Gatti 2022.

believers, Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians, ought to interpret the Christ event as the liberation of all creatures, the restoration of God's original project.

Lastly, the liberation of 'creation' is a *clarion call* to responsibility and an ethical commitment for all human beings to become collaborators of God in the care of our common home. The new condition of God's children in Christ is the stimulus to respect the environment and abstain from an unsustainable lifestyle.

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Reconciliation Process in the Letter to the Colossians (2:6–16). A Response to the Abuse Crisis

Stefania De Vito

Introduction

For several decades, we have witnessed an increase in reports of abuse within the Catholic Church in different areas of the world. There is sexual, psychological, moral and spiritual abuse of minors and adults in a vulnerable position.¹ Situations of violence also exist in other religious experiences,² family tragedies, dramas of neglect in institutions dedicated to the care of the elderly and disabled, and subtle forms of manipulation in structures dedicated to training, education and care of people.³ Our knowledge of these events has increased and has led to the development of prevention strategies, thanks to the knowledge and expertise of a wide range of disciplines, such as psychology, medicine, law and, to a lesser extent, theology. This work is not entirely satisfactory: we often see an unbridled pragmatism, the child of fragmented knowledge,⁴ which only treats the symptoms of the problem.

Why is a theological contribution indispensable to overcome this fragmentation?⁵ Can it promote a process of integral ‘healing’ of the scourge of abuse, affecting not only individuals but entire communities, civil and religious? These questions animate the current reflection and require a method that avoids the risks of pragmatism, ideologism and alienation.⁶

Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* is proposed as an example of a possible collaboration between different disciplines and religions. It initiated an in-depth reflection on the themes of ecology and economics, offering essential coordinates to recognise the anthropological crisis, hidden in the

1 Cf. McCluskey 2000, 99–116; Raine-Kent 2019, 180–9.

2 Cf. Keul 2022, 1–19.

3 Cf. Podnieks and Wilson 2013, 55–86; Proehl 2012, 249–66; Naughton, O’Donnell and Muldoon 2020, 3102–23; Mukuka 2023, 1–11.

4 Cf. De Vito 2022, 287–307.

5 Cf. De Vito and Fuchs 2024.

6 Cf. Norris 2007, 23–47.

ecological crisis.⁷ The risk of a fragmentation of knowledge (LS, 138) is overcome, therefore, by an anthropological vision that promotes choices (educational, political, economic and environmental) and activates medium- and long-term processes capable of confronting the climate and ecological crisis at its roots.

This model could serve as a pathfinder regarding the issue of abuse. If the contribution of psychology is indisputable in developing a phenomenology of abuse, if the role of jurisprudence is necessary to ensure justice, the engagement of theology in moving from a phenomenology of abuse to its hermeneutics is equally as important. The Apostolic Exhortation *Veritatis Gaudium* demands that theological studies can become “providential cultural laboratories in which the Church carries out the performative interpretation of the reality brought about by the Christ event and nourished by the gifts of wisdom and knowledge by which the Holy Spirit enriches the People of God in manifold ways – from the *sensus fidei fidelium* to the magisterium of the bishops, and from the charism of the prophets to that of the doctors and theologians” (VG, 3). Particularly, the return to Scripture recovers social and cultural values and creates a structure of thought, capable of facing the anthropological crisis and making the resources of the various disciplines a vector for the transformation of history and society.⁸

For this reason, before exegeting the biblical text, we propose a methodological, hermeneutical, and epistemological reflection that asks the fundamental questions: What is knowing? How do I know?

These seemingly irrelevant questions lay the foundation for a contextual theology that balances the knowledge of the phenomenon of abuse and an adequate exegesis of the biblical text, limiting two risks:

- relegating the text to a past that no longer exists, which prevents any process of actualisation;
- projecting the scholar’s preconceptions, prejudices and views onto the text and reality to be investigated.

An adequate knowledge of the reality of abuse leads us to new questions; they become a new horizon from which to interpret the biblical text. Finally, a sincere confrontation with the text, employing the proper exegetical tools, gives rise to new horizons that shed light on the experiential reality, renewing the practice of reflection and decision making. In this way, dialogue between disciplines is promoted and the knowledge acquired is placed at the service of mankind and the community, for their salvation.

⁷ Cf. Radvan 2023, 89–96; Beltran 2020, 39–56.

⁸ Cf. Lonergan 2017^b, 371–8.

In the light of the above, this article will be developed as follows:

- the hermeneutics of modern times and the importance of epistemologically grounded exegesis;
- the abuse crisis: the wounded relationship;
- the letter to the Colossians and its reconciliation process;
- engagement and conclusion.

1 The Hermeneutics of Modern Times and the Importance of Epistemologically Grounded Exegesis

The present reflection is based on the hermeneutical proposal of B. Lonergan and his disciple R. Doran. Both systematic theologians recognised the importance of theology and the mission of the Church of maintaining a regenerative contact with the Scripture and the so-called ‘signs of the times’.⁹ Reiterating the desire of the Second Vatican Council,¹⁰ and in particular the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (1965),¹¹ they advocate for the renewal of the biblical sciences to facilitate the encounter with contemporary mankind and theology itself. In fact, *Dei Verbum*, 24 states that the personal character of revelation and the relational dimension of faith make Scripture the soul of theology. Their relationship is explained as follows: “By scrutinising in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word” (DV, 24). The relationship between the two disciplines is described by suggestive terminology: the verb “rejuvenate,” and the terms “nourishment” and “vigour” complete the image of the Bible as the source of the spiritual life of every believer (DV, 21) and disclose the theological meaning of Scripture as “rule of faith” (DV, 21). It follows that the task of the biblical exegete and theologian is not to provide an ‘elixir’ of longevity to smooth the wrinkled face of the Church and theology, but that it is to keep the message of salvation contained in the sacred pages ‘alive’ and still ‘comprehensible’ in the complex world of today, so that it continues to be the ‘measure’ of faith and of our degree of ‘humanisation’ and ‘divinisation’, with a view to the salvation of humanity.¹²

However, neither Lonergan nor Doran offered practical directions for bringing exegesis out of its disciplinary isolation. This is a challenge for biblical

9 Cf. Himes 2002, 1–17; Dadosky 2020, 64–79; Doran 2016, 247–67.

10 Cf. Lobo 2021, 209–20.

11 Cf. Czerny 2022, 313–25.

12 Cf. Daley 2011, 333–51; Towey 2009, 206–18.

scholars, after having grasped the extent of the methodological ‘problem’ described by the two theologians. Lonergan reflected at length on the structure of human knowing and what method to propose in theology.¹³ He taught us how knowing is different from ‘taking a glance’, how knowledge is not a perennial achievement, and how important it is not to skip over the stages of the cognitive process, which range from data to decision, via insight and judgement.¹⁴ Specifically, he explained how interpretation is a cognitive process, whose object of study can be a text and its author, but also a human phenomenon and its actors.¹⁵

Textual interpretation is an exegetical process: it establishes the boundaries of the text, knows grammatical and syntactic structures, understands words, identifies literary genres, recognises the author and the intended audience, and places the text in its vital context.¹⁶ This, however, is only the first stage of the hermeneutic process, which ends with the effective communication of what is known.¹⁷ In this way, the cognitive process becomes existential: the interpreter is aware that the object of knowledge has transformed his cognitive, ethical and existential horizon, and becomes sensitive to the problem of transposing an ancient text and its meanings into modern times. Indeed, it is not a question of the recognition of grammatical and syntactical structures, nor of translating a term from Greek or Hebrew into a modern language.¹⁸ Rather, it is a question of understanding the communicative model of the author and recognising the ‘immanent’ linguistic tools with which he was able to speak of ‘transcendence’, allowing the latter to guide the path of believers. From this perspective, theology, enlightened by hermeneutical conquests, does not limit itself to repeating words or formulas. It takes up the challenge of creating new models of communication, capable of making the content of an ancient text still comprehensible and of promoting the redemption and salvation of humanity. In this way, a renewed relationship between biblical exegesis and biblical theology is proposed and the value of that evangelical hermeneutics, advocated by VG, 3 is recognised.

Doran stresses the need for a hermeneutics of historical events. He points out that the kingdom of God and the proclamation of salvation are not a matter of an ancient text, but are still the “human affairs,” the task of theology,

13 Cf. Lonergan 1992, 27–91; 618–56.

14 Cf. Lonergan 2017^b, 1–27.

15 Cf. Lonergan 2017^a, 100–9.

16 Cf. Lonergan 2017^b, 147–52.

17 Cf. Lonergan 2017^b, 158–63.

18 Cf. Lonergan 2017^b, 329–30.

and the mission of the Church to the world.¹⁹ Therefore, it is necessary for the theologian and the exegete to be aware of their cognitive structure and its limits to recognise which values have guided the historical processes under study, and whether they have fragmented or constructed a community. This hermeneutics favours personal discernment: it allows the development of a scale of values that, starting from the individual, leads to the constitution of cultural values, capable of renewing the human community.²⁰ In particular, the development of a scale of values guarantees the connection between natural intersubjectivity and practical intelligence: when 'know-how' is reduced to 'problem-solving', it does not build community and leads to an escape from reality, to ideologies and extreme pragmatism. In the restoration of cultural values, Scripture plays an important role: it offers a model of redemption, to be embodied in history.²¹

2 The Abuse Crisis: The Wounded Relationship

No reflection on the abuse crisis can be separated from its phenomenology. An example is the report published on the case of Jean Vanier: it proposes the phenomenology of 'the event' through the contribution of psychology and psychiatry, and subjects the phenomenology to theological and spiritual scrutiny.²²

Some studies suggest that the abusers' violence may originate in traumatic, abusive, or violent events experienced in childhood or adolescence when the person's relational fabric is being formed. Every child is born, grows and develops both physically and relationally,²³ thanks to 'good enough' parents who are able to identify and meet all the child's needs, both emotional and biological.²⁴ Parents are not asked not to make mistakes, but to understand the child in his/her otherness, without reducing him/her to an appendage of themselves or considering him/her a threat to their own relational or professional life. Respect for the child's individuality allows him/her to grow up in a protected environment, which facilitates trust in oneself and others, growth, emotional independence, and adaptability to the surrounding environment and the needs of others. When this care is absent, lacks the emotional involvement of

19 Cf. Doran 1990, 3–8.

20 Cf. Doran 1990, 87–90.

21 Cf. Doran 2015, 166–7.

22 Cf. Study Commission mandated by L'Arche Internationale 2023.

23 Cf. Winnicott 2021.

24 Cf. Winnicott 1990.

the parents, or when it is directed only to the care of the child's material needs, this can provoke the non-integral growth of the person.

Some authors speak about the 'wound of the unloved', which appears in those situations experienced as a 'relational emptiness', threatening and frightening. Faced with fear, the person generates different neurological and biological responses.²⁵ Some flee relationships, physical and emotional closeness with other people. Others try to fill the void, using only the 'modalities' they have experienced. They create 'fake' relationships that do not follow an adult and mature model,²⁶ and that deny natural human intersubjectivity. In such cases, symptoms of this attitude are: a lack of recognition of one's own basic needs, little concern for the person, a reduced holistic view of the other, slight empathy, poor respect for otherness, a reduction of the person to an object that functions to satisfy one's own needs.²⁷ As a result, when the need changes, a person *can be* replaced with another, more 'appropriate' to the new situation. Events and actors change, but the way relationships are managed does not. Attending to transitory needs shifts attention away from basic needs: caring for one's relationship with oneself and others.²⁸

The dynamics of the 'fake' relationship are not always visible to the outside world. Alongside physically or verbally abusive attitudes, other modes are also exhibited such as excessive custody, paternalism, excessive praise and directiveness. In these cases, the abuser seems to be socially 'functioning' and even takes on the role of charismatic leader. His 'dysfunctionality' is revealed once the mask is taken off.²⁹

This description does not do justice to the vast body of scientific literature that exists on the subject. It is useful to understand the common thread that binds an overtly violent person, an abuser of conscience or a spiritual predator. All of them, victims of abusive practices, or of a handed-down cultural or parental model, are victims of themselves and live locked in the prison of their past. Just as they reduce the other to an object to be used, so they reduce themselves to an object to be filled.

The abuse crisis, therefore, is the crisis of a wounded relationship that erases the psycho-physical unity of the person and destroys his/her ability to relate to others, to self-transcend, to mature social and cultural needs, to the point of reaching a relationship with the Transcendent.

25 Cf. Masci 2021, 41–77.

26 Cf. Schellenbaum 1991.

27 Cf. Vignati 2019, 11–34.

28 Cf. Siegel-Hartzell 2014.

29 Cf. Pundt 2014, 190–202; Vignati 2019, 65–72.

3 The Letter to the Colossians and its Reconciliation Process

A vast literature is available on the Letter to the Colossians. Particular attention has been paid to the question of its authorship³⁰ and the so-called Colossian *heresy*,³¹ whose background is difficult to reconstruct. This present contribution will not deal with these issues: we will focus on the communicative dynamics of the letter. Its texture, woven of rhetorical, grammatical and syntactical structures, semantic choices, and *hapax legomena*, represents a form of contextualised theology, in which the apostle does not intend to expound the contents of an ideology already known to his interlocutors, but proposes his own path of deepening faith. In fact, “the theology that comes to expression in this letter is intended to convince the Colossian Christians not to succumb to the false teaching that has arisen in their midst.”³²

The intention is already evident in the epistolary *praescriptum* in which Paul addresses this community with the appellative ἀδελφοί, which is never employed in an epistolary opening. This concept is pivotal in constructing the relational climax, as it facilitates the establishment of relationships that are characterised by mutuality and reciprocal interaction, even if Paul is not the founder of the community. It also points to Christ as the foundation of this relational fabric. As stated in Colossians 1:19, it is evident that the term is more accurately defined in this context. In this passage, Christ is recognised as the supreme leader and the fundamental authority of the body of the Church.³³ The expression “in Christ” is peculiar: in its locative function, it permeates many moments of the letter. Thus, Christ is the foundation of the relationship between Paul and the Colossians, of creation (1:16–17), of Christian perfection (1:28), of wisdom and knowledge (2:3), of believing ethics (2:6), and of faith (2:7). Further, being rooted in the divine fullness in Christ and his circumcision (2:9), transforms the relationship from one of apparent immobility (2:11) to full and active participation. Grammatically, the expression “in Christ” introduces verbs prefixed by συν-, a typically Pauline innovation, also attested in other letters.³⁴ Finally, the *divine passives* συνθάπτω, συνεγείρω (2:12; 3:1), and συζωοποιέω in its active form (2:13), have God as the logical subject. These verbal forms allude, therefore, to a participation in the fullness of the divinity

30 Cf. Tönsing 2020, 1–17; Gupta 2013, 196–217; Pascuzzi 2013, 223–45; Lincicum 2017, 171–93.

31 Cf. Royalty 2002, 329–57; Morris 2008, 1–64; Fossum 1989, 183–201; Yates 1986, 49–68.

32 Moo 2008, 60–1.

33 Cf. Martin 1992, 249–55.

34 Cf. De Vito 2023, 15–32.

in Christ, which involves both the action of God the Father and of believers, through faith.

The theme is already announced in the epistolary opening, in the section on thanksgiving, where Paul acknowledges that the faith and love of this community have their origin in the Gospel they have heard (1:6). He then prays that the believers may still grow in the knowledge of God's will (1:9), in the gift of endurance and generosity (1:11), and in good works worthy of the Lord (1:9–10). "These connections reveal as clearly as any text in the New Testament the intimate relationship between theology and practice, between ontology and ethics. Only if Christ is who Paul claims he is, can he provide the 'fullness' that the false teachers are claiming "to offer in their alternative construal of religious experience."³⁵

The transition from ἐν to σὺν is provided by the terms ἀπολύτρωσις and ἀποκαταλλάσσω (1:20, 22). Ἀπολύτρωσις derives from the verb λύτρωι, used in the LXX (19x) to describe the liberating action performed by God towards the Jews enslaved in Egypt. As is evident in the Pauline usage in Colossians 1, there is a recall and actualisation of the Exodus narrative: the liberation process is willed by the Father and guaranteed by the Son, and involves a transformation of identity underlined by the theme of the transition from one kingdom to another.³⁶ The use of ἄφεσις in an appositive function to ἀπολύτρωσις is interesting. It also belongs to the semantics of 'redemption': derived from the verb ἀφίημι, it can be translated as 'to release', 'to leave', 'to allow' or 'to forgive.' However, Paul's use of the exodus motif for revealing God's work through Christ in 1:12–13 suggests that the aim is not forgiveness but liberation. In these verses, we find not a liturgical but a redemptive motif: in Christ, liberation from sin implies that sin has subjected humans to slavery. Colossians 2 offers a perspective on the underlying theme of slavery, suggesting that certain teachings, which are not in alignment with the teachings of Christ, can create rules that may feel restrictive to the Colossians. By inference, we can state that they too are a form of slavery to be rejected in order to continue on the path of redemptive freedom.

The verb ἀποκαταλλάσσω appears only in Col 1:20, 22 and Eph 2:16. It is absent in other Pauline texts. Since it is not found even in classical and Hellenistic literature, scholars claim that it has been coined by Paul, who added the prefix ἀπό to the verb καταλλάσσω meaning 'to reconcile' (cf. Rom 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18–19). It is thought that the prefix may possibly have a reinforcing function, in that it could indicate complete reconciliation and restoration of lost peace. It seems that the meaning may also be emphasised by the verb εἰρηνοποιέω in

35 Moo 2008, 61.

36 Cf. Sappington 1991, 192–223.

its appositive function, as well as by the noun πλήρωμα. Furthermore, there appears to be a parallelism between Colossians 1:16 and 18, which suggests continuity between creation and reconciliation. The aorist form of ἀποκαταλλάσσω and εἰρηνοποιέω makes reconciliation coincide with the cross of Christ. Finally, the grammatical construction *dia* + genitive (vv.20, 22) indicates the blood of the cross and [Christ's] death as the instruments of reconciliation. The experience of reconciliation becomes universal and ecclesial, and retains strong Christological traits. It affects the entirety of the ἐκκλησία, which knows no distinction between Jew and Greek, free or slave. It has as its pivot the cross, which opens the way to the resurrection of the entire people of God, and banishes those false teachings which, born from a fleshly mind, multiply rules and precepts that 'judge' human beings, separating them from the only event that offers freedom: the cross of Christ. According to the apostle's theology, only the cross of Jesus humanises and resurrects the believers.

4 Engagement and Conclusion

Paul is aware of elements that jeopardise the integration of the individual into the community and prevent their participation in rebirth and resurrection. In the disciplinary field we investigate, this suggests that the proposals that have matured around the challenges of abuse need to overcome the multiplication of laws and precepts that, in an attempt to face a challenge, do not favour redemptive practices. From an ecclesial perspective, it is impossible to think of a theology of abuse without Christological and staurological content. But how do they foster the integration of the human sciences in the face of the challenge of abuse?

The answer deserves further reflection. However, the Pauline Model recognises a 'slavery' that subjects mankind, depriving him of Christ, expropriating him of his full humanity: freedom. The latter is source of a new identity, and, consequently, of actions and constructive relations, beyond fragmented identity and decisions. If the various disciplines are unanimous in recognising abuse as a relational wound and allow themselves to be enlightened by the Pauline perspective, then it would be possible to recognise the limits of those practices that treat abuse as a 'cancerous' cell of society and the Church, or limit themselves to "expel" the predator from his/her context or propose only a psychological, legal or moral engagement. The risk is to offer not a journey of redemption, but further enslavement, unable to break the chains of false relationships that controlled his/her past. Valid redemptive systems cannot be enforced on others; neither do they cause immediate or automatic effects.

They require the voluntary participation of the perpetrator to get involved and accept the challenge of self-exploration. However, from the point of view of praxis, the first step towards 'redemption' is to recognise in the abuser and abused the face of Christ Crucified, who liberates from the imprisonment of a wounded past and creates a new community.

Preventive instruments thus take on a different relevance. They coincide with a cultural renewal that promotes inter-subjectivity and a holistic view of the person and helps the individual in the 'complete' realisation of self in the community.

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APOCALYPSE



How We Imagine Salvation Matters in Times of Ecological Crisis: An Ecocritical Appraisal of Revelation 21–22

Rodolfo Felices Luna

Introduction

It has become commonplace in modern exegesis to rectify a ‘catastrophic’ reading of the last book in the New Testament canon: the Revelation of St. John. Understood within the apocalyptic genre that flourished about two centuries before the Christ event and extended two centuries after, Revelation is rightfully seen as driven by the hope of salvation *in the midst of a global crisis* rather than by fear of the world’s annihilation.¹ Granted, deadly horsemen, beasts, monstrous locusts and a dragon populate a terrestrial scene where unrelenting destruction seems unleashed. Yet it is a story of peaceful resistance against evil, of faithful endurance, and of hope in divine deliverance and justice. The struggle that the saints (and the readers) endure in the core of the book is framed by visions of the heavenly court at the beginning (Rev 4–5), and of the final dwelling place of God together with humanity at the end (Rev 21–22). In between, several liturgical respites and announcements of victory punctuate a growing spiral of conflict, so that the saints (and the readers) may pick up courage along the way. If Revelation is most lucid about the dark ravages of empire upon the world, it is nonetheless a book of light and hope.

This study focuses on the final vision of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven upon earth in Rev 21–22.² In light of the present ecological crisis, the image of the city will be put under scrutiny. How well does it speak – or not – to our unprecedented predicament? After briefly rehearsing the array of Johannine images of salvation in both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation, the main features of the new Jerusalem will be critically assessed, from an

1 Cf. Barr 2003, 1–9; more in depth, Morton 2014.

2 The vision has been studied at length. Aside from corresponding sections in exegetical commentaries, cf. Malina 2000; Lee 2001.

ecological standpoint.³ Attention will be paid to the differing role of a city throughout time, from the biblical city to our post-modern configuration of urban agglomerations. Rooted in the endangered world of the actual readers of today, our reading of Rev 21–22 may hopefully still yield practical wisdom and inspiration from the faith and context of our ancestors.

1. Johannine Images of Salvation

The religious idea of 'salvation' is conveyed through figurative language. Any discourse on transcendent, other-worldly concepts or experiences is bound to make use of earthly references to speak of more-than-earthly realities. The theological mind and its theological language work through analogy, symbol, metaphor, simile.⁴ Using our experience and knowledge of earthly realities as figures of the transcendent, theological language supports the intuition and conceptualisation of transcendental experiences. Spiritual needs are thus construed analogous to biological or material ones. Just as physical forces may threaten our physical integrity (heat, cold, drowning, crushing, predators, etc.), what may threaten our spiritual integrity that we need to be 'saved from'? Just as we crave food, drink, shelter, and we delight in finding the most appropriate responses to these needs, what do we aspire for spiritually? What do we yearn to be 'saved for'? Our theological language on salvation is based on the limits of our human condition, which we experience and aspire to transcend.

The Johannine tradition offers a wealth of images to vividly depict spiritual or religious 'salvation'. The traditional corpus comprises the Fourth canonical Gospel, three Letters, and the Book of Revelation. In these writings, images of salvation stemming from the Hebrew Scriptures are predicated of Jesus Christ or associated with him as messianic gifts of the end times. In the Johannine Gospel and Letters, salvation is likened to fulfilling the basic needs of living beings: water to drink (John 4:1–15; 7:37–39; 1 John 5:6–8); light with which to move safely about (John 1:9; 3:19–21; 8:12; 9:4–5; 12:46; 1 John 1:5–7; 2:8–11); bread to eat (John 6:32–58); pasture and protection from predators for sheep (John 10:1–16); pruning for the branches of a vine (John 15:1–8). Salvation is also likened to healing from an illness or disability (John 4:46–54; 5:1–18; 9:1–7). Ultimately, salvation is not dying forever (John 5:24–29; 11:1–44.)

3 Ecological hermeneutics is a relatively new endeavour. For its application to our text, cf. Rossing 1998, 487–99; Reid 2000, 232–45; Ibita 2017, 561–78; Sorita 2017, 579–93.

4 Cf. Räßple 2004.

Our language regarding salvation also depends on cultural practices and customs. In the Fourth Gospel, salvation is likened to a wedding feast with abundant wine of the finest quality (John 2:1–11) or holding the birthright to enter God's realm and dwell with God (John 3:3–8; 8:35–36; 20:17). Salvation can further be described as the appropriate solution to any specific social predicament a group may face. In the case of the Johannine community, followers of Jesus were cast out of the Jewish synagogue (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Accordingly, the Johannine Jesus assures them that he would never cast out those who come to him (John 6:37). Moreover, he promises his disciples a room to dwell in his Father's house (John 14:2–3), and when risen, he sends them greetings as his brothers (John 20:17). What more appropriate salvation for outcasts than a new family and a welcoming home in which to dwell?

The book of Revelation gushes with images of salvation, again deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. To name but a few, in the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2–3), the risen Christ promises the following symbols of salvation to the victors of faithful endurance: to eat from the tree of life in the garden of God (2:7); not to be harmed by the second death (2:11); to be given some of the hidden manna and a personal amulet (2:17); to be given the morning star and to share in messianic authority to rule (2:26–28); to have one's name acknowledged in the book of life and to be dressed in white (3:5); to sit with Christ and the Father on God's throne (3:21). Remarkably, in the letter to the church in Philadelphia, the victor is promised to be made into a pillar in God's temple, never to leave it again. Such a blessed pillar will have inscribed upon it the names of God, Christ, and "the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven from my God" (3:12).⁵

2. New Jerusalem as Our Final Destination

The promise of salvation to the Philadelphians in Rev 3:12 foreshadows the end of the book in chapters 21–22, where the final vision is that of a glorious and new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. At the end of chapter 20, after the great battle between Satan and the nations against God's holy ones (20:7–9), the earth and the sky dramatically flee from God's presence, making room at last for the new to come (20:11.)

⁵ Unless specified otherwise, biblical quotations are taken from the *New American Bible Revised Edition* (NABRE).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more (21:1).

There is discussion among scholars as to whether this new state of creation is replacing or transforming the former state.⁶ Such a discussion becomes all the more relevant from the perspective of our current ecological predicament: If annihilation is what this world is divinely destined for, why care for it? To the contrary, if God will renew creation instead of replacing it, then care for creation may be understood as our faithful participation in God's renewal of it, hence, care for creation may be required of us. We will assume the latter and move on, for our focus of interest is on the vision thereafter, that of a city as our final dwelling place.

I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (21:2)

A voice coming from the throne reveals this city as God's intended dwelling place with the human race, the place where the longed-for covenantal relationship may finally be established (21:3). Reminiscent of the hopes voiced by prophets and psalmists, God will wipe away tears (Rev 21:4; Isa 25:8; 35:10), provide life-giving water (Rev 21:6; Isa 55:1; Ps 36:8–10), make of every individual an anointed child of God in messianic fashion (Rev 21:7; 2 Sam 7:12–17). All of this will take place in the new sacred space made available for the human-divine encounter. Stretching from 21:2 through 22:5, Revelation's final vision is that of a place where humans can interact in peace with God, creation and one another. This place is called a city, the new Jerusalem.⁷ The description thereof unfolds from Rev 21:9 to 22:5.

The city is a walled square, with three gates per wall facing each cardinal direction: east, north, south and west. It sits on a foundation of twelve courses of precious stones. Each wall is made of jasper, each gate is a single enormous pearl, and the city and its single street are made of clear transparent gold, gleaming with God's splendour. The city is measured with a rod by an angel: it is gigantic, even by our modern standards! Each side and height measure twelve thousand stadia (1,500 miles or about 2,400 kilometres). As a means of visualising the area, such a city would cover almost half of the United States and reach up deep into space, about 285 times the height of Mount Everest.

⁶ Cf. Stephens 2011.

⁷ The city is also called a bride, wed to a lamb (Rev 21:2b, 9b). Here we only investigate the city as such.

Apart from its unwieldy size, what might be the problem with such a city envisioned in the Christian canon of Scripture as the final image of salvation? Granted that all images of salvation are stated in figurative language (not a realistic account), who would not like to spend eternity in perfect symmetry, solid foundations and walls, open gates, surrounded by shiny gold, pearls and precious stones? What is there not to like?

3. Cities in the Anthropocene Era

Through science and technology, we humans have gained so much power to transform our environment that our impact upon the planet now scars it with *geological* force. One single species has flourished past the tipping point of homeostasis and symbiosis with other living creatures. Eight billion people now occupy all ecosystems available, subjugating wildlife, and driving it extinct. Humans not only rule the earth, but we also occupy it almost completely. Humans stood up on their own two feet as a carbon-burning species, but now our unimpeded success is altering the climate on earth through the abundance of greenhouse gases we frenetically pump into the atmosphere, as a by-product of our extraction, manufacture, agro-industrial and transportation endeavours to meet and exceed our civilised 'needs'. It is just as if we had decided to create volcanoes to the point of triggering another mass extinction of life forms, like the five past ones that punctuate the 4-billion-year history of our planet. This is why a growing number of scientists, philosophers and humanists consider that we are living in a new *geological* age – the Anthropocene Age – far beyond the stability of the Holocene Age that gave birth to our species.⁸

Cities drive the economy of the late Anthropocene era in which we live. States can wage wars, negotiate treaties, or legislate policy, but cities vie for global companies to do business in them, providing jobs, products, and services to their population. Cities lobby to house the headquarters of finance and the corporate world. Cities have been around for at least four thousand years, ever since the Bronze Age. However, whereas most of the world population lived in rural areas until the 19th century due to an economy based on landownership and agriculture, the new industrial economy has pushed ever-growing populations to live in centres – that is, cities – created for the production of manufactured goods to earn a living.

According to the United Nations' records and estimates, "the urban population of the world has grown rapidly from 751 million in 1950 to 4.2 billion in

8 For an overview of the concept, cf. Ellis 2018.

2018.” As a result, “today, 55% of the world’s population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 68% by 2050.”⁹ Another 2.5 billion people will be added to those already heavily populated urban areas by 2050. Inversely, the rural population is expected to decline from 3.4 billion in 2018 to 3.1 billion in 2050. This massive and ongoing rural exodus puts enormous pressure on cities for housing, water and sewage, energy distribution, and waste collection.

Cities import natural resources from rural areas, consume, pollute, and export their waste to landfills, sometimes even abroad! Too often, people who live in cities are estranged from the rural world, and look upon it as an alien quarry filled with unlimited goods, or as a getaway scene for sports, travel and recreation. Cities thus dominate and inflict harm on rural areas, impervious to the irony that their very life depends on those areas. According to the Global Footprint Network, “the global effort for sustainability will be won, or lost, in the world’s cities, where 70 to 80 percent of the world’s population is expected to live by 2050.”¹⁰ At present, cities are actually vampirising the earth’s resources, driving pollution and climate change, not quite reversing the trend. Even more aggravating, cities keep growing and multiplying, invading the countryside, sprawling into agglomeration areas that defy any city limits, occupying more land, accounting for the habitat loss of countless species threatened with extinction. Nowadays, inhabitable land is an intricate network of roads, highways and railways – connecting cities. Meanwhile, the wilderness – God’s creation – recedes and agonises, having nowhere left to live and thrive.

In this context, how can we *responsibly*¹¹ proclaim as ‘good news’ that God’s ultimate goal is to establish a gigantic city? Is this ‘salvation’ image at all relevant for humanity’s predicament in the late Anthropocene – not to mention for all other living creatures?

4. Ecocritical Appraisal of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22

Maybe God’s urban development plan according to the Book of Revelation is not so bad after all. Let us examine it closely.

- First, the shape of the city (a square) and the location of the gates (three on each side), turn the human gaze to the four cardinal directions,

9 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>, accessed March 27, 2024.

10 <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/cities/>, accessed March 27, 2024.

11 See the hermeneutical thrust in Gorman 2011.

encompassing all creation. The text explicitly draws the reader's attention to those cardinal points, thereby orienting the inhabitants outwardly, not inwardly (21:13).

- Second, seated upon a “great, high mountain” the city dominates the scene while blending in with its natural environment. Although no mountain on earth could seat such a city because of its unwieldy size, the image attempts to ground the city in the natural world, not extirpate it from it (21:10).
- Third, the building materials showcase nature's best: jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, hyacinth, amethyst, pearls and pure gold (21:19–21).
- Fourth, a river runs through the city flowing “down the middle of its street” from the deity's throne. Its waters quench the thirst of the just (22:1–2; 21:6; 22:17).
- Finally, the Edenic tree of life (Gen 2:9) grows abundantly “on either side of the river” within the city walls. Every month, the tree of life yields its precious fruit, and its leaves “serve as medicine for the nations” (22:2).

In sum, we read of a city grounded in nature, with only one street, drenched by a river, with fruit-bearing trees on either side providing nourishment and healing. This seems to be a form of a garden-city, or an eco-city, so to speak.

However, one could argue that God's city is not so green. The sheer size of it implies habitat loss for living creatures. One may wonder whatever happened in John's vision to the array of animals that came out of Noah's ark in Gen 8:19. Apparently, nothing outside the city walls really matters: John's vision is strictly about the city and all therein, which is also the sole focus of divine attention. No wilderness is mentioned: the city's inhabitants alone are deemed worthy of entering through its gates because of their moral behaviour. There is a hint in 22:14 that all those entering the city have been martyred, since only those “who wash their robes” are allowed in, an expression reminiscent of the martyrs in 6:11 and 7:14. Aside from the Lamb who sits on the throne with God (22:1), no other animals are mentioned. Actually, the Lamb stands for Christ; and he is a slaughtered Lamb (5:6, 9, 12). Since God and the Lamb provide all the light needed (21:23), this city-world does without celestial bodies, making it the ultimate geocentric universe! In contrast to the water flow in Gen 2:6, the river of life in Rev 21–22 does not bring forth new life forms. Finally, the fruits and the leaves of the tree of life seem to benefit humankind only, making this an extremely anthropocentric cosmos. This is precisely the limited vision that, according to historian Lynn White, has led us to ecological disaster.¹² Should we still hope for a new Jerusalem?

¹² Cf. White Jr. 1967, 1203–07.

The Book of Revelation was written two millennia before humanity fully realised its devastating impact on the natural world. In all fairness, in the *Critias*, Plato did describe the appalling view of the eroded slopes of Mount Parnes near Athens, caused by unchecked deforestation; Horace complained of air pollution in Rome.¹³ Yet it would have been unrealistic or anachronistic for them or for John to imagine that an urban lifestyle would subdue or permanently damage the vibrant earth. King David had to protect his flock from lions and bears (1 Sam 17:34–36), and Paul the Apostle had to remind the Corinthians of his exposure to multiple dangers during inter-city travel (2 Cor 11:26). In the end, nature always prevailed. Humanity lived in a state of constant battle for survival against wild natural forces that reigned unchallenged. A small human population surviving throughout the ages could not have fathomed its impact on the apparently endless supply of resources that seemed to regenerate seasonally.

Only when modern humanity travelled around the globe and beyond it, from the window of Apollo 8 in 1968, did we fully realise that we lived in a sphere – in a *limited* quarry of sorts. We understood that we could dry up precious resources and permanently pollute with our waste the only planet we have to live on. With our growing numbers and enhanced technology, the biosphere has shrunk, and our cities have sprawled. Their number, demographic density, and unchecked needs do threaten the natural world nowadays. Ancient cities, even medieval ones, did not put the same amount of pressure upon their environment as have the cities of our times since the Industrial Revolution. In an insightful study, Bruce Malina¹⁴ spells out the major differences that mark off the socio-political and economic functions of cities throughout human history: who dwells in them, who visits them, who are recognised as citizens, who the ruling social class is, what type of economy sustains them, what type of labour force the economy calls for, what are the goods consumed and what type of control is exercised over them, what the relationship is between the city and the rural world surrounding it.

Even if the same label *polis*, *civitas*, ‘city’ is applied to human settlements through time, very different social realities and living conditions are conveyed by the term, depending on the period of time involved: Antiquity? Middle-Ages? Industrial Revolution? Post-Modern urban agglomeration? The gist is, aside from being centres of governance, ancient and medieval cities were protected granaries and commercial hubs, not living quarters for most of

13 For an informative account on the ancients’ perspective, cf. Hughes 2014.

14 Cf. Malina 2000, 26–45.

the population. From the Industrial Revolution on, cities now house a labour force that manufactures goods and provides services. In Malina's own words:

Having a spider in one's kitchen is not the same as having a lion in one's living room. And yet, to say that one has an animal in the house, referring to the spider, is as misleading as talking about the 'first urban Christians,' as though they had anything 'urban' in common with us today.¹⁵

John's vision of a new Jerusalem as salvation is thus no 'free pass' for our present urban madness. One must account for ancient standards and expectations. At this point, we could legitimately ask whether the image of the new Jerusalem really fits the concept of a *city*, even by ancient standards.¹⁶ The obvious answer is yes. It is the seat of government and cult for a people, with the divine throne in it (21:3, 22; 22:1, 3, 5). Covenantal language taken up from Ezek 37:27 highlights this point: "He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God" (Rev 21:3). The city is strategically located upon high ground (21:10) and enclosed by walls for protection against invading armies (21:12, 17–18). Access to the city is controlled through guarded gates that close at night and leave out doers of abominable things (21:12–13, 25). Its inhabitants are sustained by fresh water and food supplies, essential commodities in times of siege (22:1–2). Significantly, the riches of the realm and of vassal states flow into it (21:24, 26.)

In our post-modern era, cities are not physically walled-in: radar and firewalls are invisible to the eye, yet provide more efficient electronic alternatives to filter out hostile intruders. Notwithstanding, cities remain centres of power that suck in natural resources for consumption and enjoyment, and which burn out waste (Rev 21:8; 22:15). In this sense, we are caught within the plan for human development laid out in the Bronze Age, when the first cities were built. Environmental historian J. Donald Hughes sees this major cultural shift illustrated in the Mesopotamian Epic, when King Gilgamesh turns wilderness friend Enkidu into an ally to fight the protector of forests Humbaba in order to bring cedar wood to build up a palace for himself in his city of Uruk.¹⁷ Gone is the Paleolithic era of hunter-gatherers, mobile and in sync with nature. Gilgamesh's Uruk would secure the harvest provided by the Neolithic villagers who discovered agriculture. For better or for worse, humanity henceforth

15 Malina 2000, 32.

16 For a classic presentation of the city in the Bible, cf. Frick 1977. For theological insight, cf. Neville 1971; Brown and Carroll 2000, 3–11.

17 Cf. Hughes 2014, 32–3.

embraced city-building, and the king's logic. Our earliest literature glories in this feat, and John's final vision to save humanity would appear to concur ... or does it really?

Certain features of the new Jerusalem of Revelation seem to subvert the ancient city project.

- The new Jerusalem holds a throne, but no temple because God and the Lamb are immediately present. Therefore, no temple mediation is needed to communicate with the deity, something unheard of in ancient cities (21:22; 22:1, 3).
- All its citizens reign together, which actually dismantles any sense of a 'monarchy'! (22:5)
- Its overcoming size defeats the purpose of being set on high ground; why build the city upon a mountain when the walls rise up to space? (21:16)
- Also, walls of jasper and gates of pearl may be beauties to admire, but these building materials hardly constitute adequate defence (21:18, 21).
- Additionally, having the gates open at all times would certainly not have been a 'best practice' for ancient cities (21:25).
- Strikingly enough, water actually flows from the throne out and food is grown within the city walls (22:1, 2). This 'city' looks more like a hybrid, a garden-city reminiscent of Eden in Gen 2–3.
- Most significantly, and in sharp contrast with the fallen city of Babylon in 17–18, no commercial activity is mentioned.¹⁸
- Instead, healing through the leaves of the tree of life is *freely* provided to the incoming nations bringing down any ethnic, national, or imperial order (22:2).

By subverting the model of an ancient city, the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21–22 challenges its readers to reimagine what a human settlement should stand for and feel like, in light of God's plan of salvation for all.

5. Reimagining Our Cities

What should we make of all this then? John the prophet clearly built upon the Jewish yearning for a Holy City of God, Jerusalem. He envisioned it as the final place of encounter with God, the realm of the saved, once God had upended all persecution and oppression endured by the faithful. First century readers would easily relate to a city as a sure stronghold, a haven wherein to dwell and

¹⁸ For an ethical assessment of trade in Revelation, Cf. Kowalski 2017, 421–32.

thrive, especially if all wrongdoers were kept out. The theological imagination could unfold, grounded on that firm, cultural and Scriptural base.¹⁹

We cannot imagine salvation without any reference whatsoever to our physical earthly experience, or outside of our cultural concept of the good life. Yet John of Patmos did not yield to the political fantasy of establishing the good life by human force or human genius on earth. The new Jerusalem comes down from heaven, a gift from God, not a human feat. No technologically advanced or even morally advanced society may bring it about. We can only pay heed to the prophet's call for faithful endurance amid our own trials and challenges. Still, John's Apocalypse does provide an inspired glimpse of the holy, safe space we can hope for, and commit to inhabit, by our moral choices. Such a safe and holy place is marked by relationships held in God's presence, under God's guiding light, not by social privilege or commercial savviness. Solidarity is key: all nations are invited and welcome, all may enter and drink from the river of life-giving water, all may eat from the fruit of the tree of life, all may be healed by its leaves – all will reign together, not submitting to the luckiest, the smartest or the strongest. In particular, when reimagining our cities after John's vision, we must avoid the pitfall of favouring certain cities of the global north as garden-cities and turning cities of the global south into polluted centres of manufacture and dumping sites.

No city on planet Earth could ever claim to fully incarnate the new Jerusalem; we know that since Augustine momentarily wrote *The City of God* at the fall of Rome – the would-be eternal city. Nevertheless, our cities reflect our relationships and our commitments to one another, our care for other creatures in God's Garden. Through our daily choices, they can and must express our hope for life beyond the Anthropocene. There is no nostalgic return possible to the Paleolithic era of hunter-gatherers, or to the Neolithic era of modest pre-industrial agriculture in villages. For better or for worse, our destiny is bound to the fate of our cities. May John's vision renew our ways to garden them all.

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19 Cf. Mills 2022, 339–51.

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